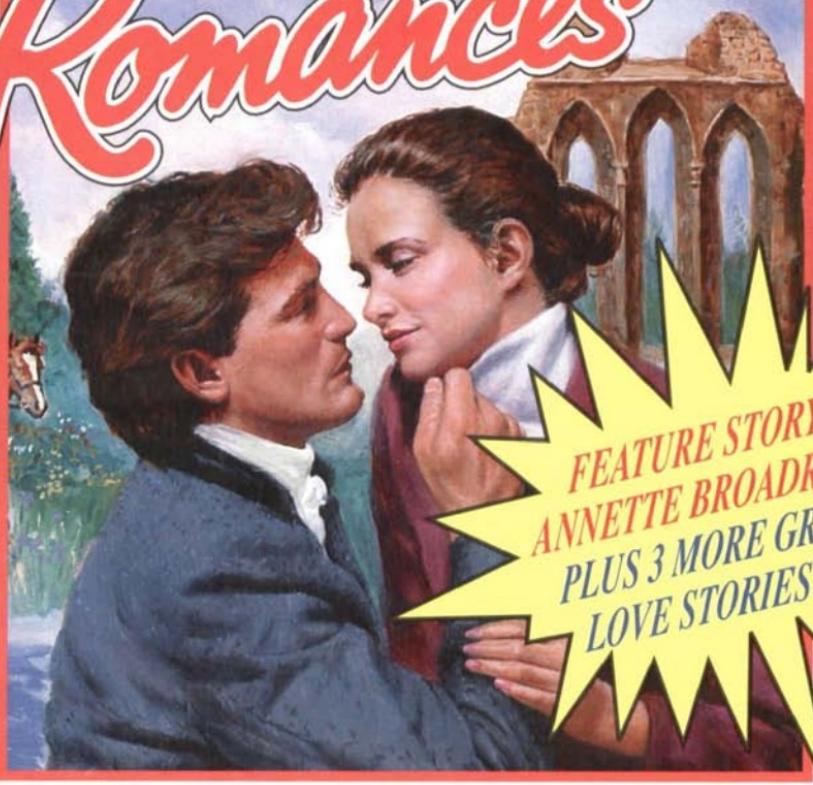


Vol. 5 No. 4
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ANNETTE BROADRICK

Annette Broadrick, award-winning author, has written over 40 books and believes in romance and the magic of life. Since 1984, when her first book was published, Annette has shared her view of life and love with readers all over the world.

BETSY PAGE

Betsy Page, an American author, decided to write her first book when she was pregnant with her third son. She was reading a romance novel and found herself saying, "My heroine would have more spunk." Now she can't imagine a better occupation, one that allows her to stay home with the children—something she strongly believes in—and spend her days fantasizing about heroes and heroines. And she stresses how lucky she is to have a very supportive husband.



SUZANNE CAREY

Suzanne Carey is a former reporter and magazine editor who prefers to write romance novels because they add to the sum total of love in the world.

KATE DENTON

Kate Denton is a pseudonym for the writing team of Carolyn Hake and Jeanie Lambright. Both are Texans by adoption, Carolyn having come from Louisiana, Jeanie from Oklahoma. They work as specialists for the federal government in Health and Handicap Services (Carolyn) and Equal Employment Opportunity (Jeanie). Each has three children, and an assortment of cats and dogs! They are both history buffs, and their hobbies include cooking, reading, old movies (Carolyn) and traveling, reading, ballet and writing country and western song lyrics (Jeanie)

HARLEQUIN®
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Romances

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

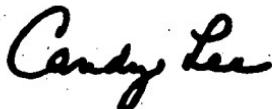
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Welcome to this month's fabulous collection of the World's Best Romances! Inside you'll find carefully chosen stories about couples joined together for reasons other than love. Can this possibly lead to romance and marriage?

Love is a strange and wonderful emotion; it certainly seems to happen despite a couple's avowal of other reasons for getting together. Curl up and relax with this month's volume where...a cool businessman and a red-haired beauty are brought together giving new meaning to the saying "opposites attract"...a two-year arrangement offering a way out of enormous debt leads to an unexpected passion...a marriage with the sole purpose of having a child brings feelings to the surface long thought buried...and a marriage to save a political career unleashes desire and a wish for permanence in the heart of the legislative aide selected for the role of the bride!

Let this month's volume of the World's Best Romances open your thoughts to all the different possibilities of love. Enjoy!

Best wishes,



112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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ANNETTE BROADRICK

Unheavenly Angel



Petite, red-haired, Paris-raised
Angel Bennington surprises herself when
she falls for handsome, aloof Blake Carlyle.
If the attraction is mutual, Angel *may* be the
last to know.


For the first time in his fifty-five years, Harrison Tyler felt old. Harry sat behind Scott Bennington's impressive desk and studied the two young people seated across from him. How had time slipped away? He clearly remembered the day Blake Carlyle was born—he, Todd Carlyle and Scott Bennington celebrating the arrival of Todd's firstborn by getting rip-roaring drunk.

That had been more than thirty-two years ago, and there were still so many things the three men, friends since grade school, had intended to do together. Not that they hadn't done a lot. But for some reason they had behaved as though they would live forever.

Scott and Todd had been wrong.

Now it was left to Harry to inform their offspring of the plans they had made for their children.

His gaze fell admiringly on Angel Bennington, a beauty since the day she was born, almost twenty-six years ago:

She had always been tiny for her age, reminding Harry of a sprite flitting among the massive furniture amassed by generations of Benningtons, looking almost as out of place as her mother had obviously felt. Angel had been only five when Yvette had declared that she would never be happy living in

San Francisco, and that she and *la belle Angel* were returning to France.

Scott had been devastated, but he had survived. When Angel was older, she visited San Francisco each summer, and Scott flew to France several times a year to see her.

The adult Angel still looked like a pixie. A very sad pixie. She had lost the father she adored, just as Harry had lost his two closest friends.

No one knew what Blake was feeling. No one ever did.

Scott and Todd had decided to go into the electronics business several years before, and Harry had been their attorney. He had watched the business mushroom into a multimillion-dollar corporation with all of the stock held by the two men.

Blake had gone to work for the company as soon as he graduated from Harvard, being groomed to take over the business someday. What nobody had expected was a plane crash in the Orient, killing all passengers, including the two partners.

Of course they had made provisions for their offspring, but unfortunately they treated the whole thing as a joke. The idea they hatched between them was the re-

sult of an all-night poker party, and Harry had felt certain that by dawn's sober light they would forget it. Unfortunately they hadn't.

Things might have been different if Blake's mother had not died when he was ten. Lydia Blake Carlyle had always been a cool, aloof woman, but perhaps she could have exerted some influence over the proceedings. Harry certainly hadn't been able to do so.

Studying the man seated before him, Harry found himself wondering if Todd's only son had taken after his mother.

Blake wasn't cold, exactly. Reserved was a better description. He had his father's height and muscular build and his mother's dark coloring, but it was his roguish smile, so seldom seen, that reminded Harry that he was Todd's son.

Blake had had little to smile about during these past several days. He'd had to arrange the double funeral, to contact Angel in France and to continue running the business.

It was the disposition of the business that was the crux of the matter now.

Harry cleared his throat, pointedly looking first at Blake, then at Angel. Blake's compelling black-eyed stare steadily met his, while Angel's large, sapphire blue gaze caused a lump to form in Harry's throat. The fiery flame of her burnished curls gave her face an aureole effect. With her sad expression

she did, indeed, appear to be a grieving angel.

"I don't believe that Scott or Todd imagined that the documents I am about to read to you would ever be put into effect. I'm ashamed to say that I feel they were an attempt at their brand of rather ribald humor. Had either of you married before their deaths, I'm sure changes would have been made immediately."

Blake Carlyle shifted in his chair, startled at the mention of marriage. Surely the situation was simple enough, since he and Angel were the only ones in line to inherit.

Angel surreptitiously wiped a tear away. She did not want to show her grief in front of Blake Carlyle. She barely knew the man. Although only six years older, he had always seemed adult to her. Perhaps it was because he was so serious and reserved.

According to her father, Blake had a natural flair for the business. He had greatly admired Blake, and Angel trusted her father's judgment implicitly. But she was the first to acknowledge that she and Blake had nothing in common.

Angel's thoughts, emotions and ambitions centered on the art world. Her first painting sold when she was sixteen. Her mother was killed in a car crash when Angel was nineteen. By the time she was twenty-one, she was living in Paris among painters, sculptors and students of art. Her income derived

from the trust Scott had set up for her when she was born. Additionally, during the ten years she had been painting professionally her work had increased in value and recognition.

No one but her father knew how successful Angel had become with her painting. It had been a joke between them that the halo signature she used on her paintings had been interpreted to mean a ring. Those who insisted on knowing the artist's name were told AB, which they assumed stood for Abraham, instead of her initials.

It didn't matter to Angel what arrangements had been made with regard to her father's estate. She had lost the one person who meant the most to her in all the world. Now she reached into her small handbag, pulled out a fine lawn handkerchief and glanced up at Harry, praying that he wouldn't go on much longer.

"I have provided each of you with copies of these documents, but since each one is several pages long, I will try to cover the major points.

"The buy-sell agreement states that in the event something should happen to either Todd or Scott, the remaining party will buy out the other's interest, paying the money into the estate."

Blake leaned forward. "That is certainly fair, and I will be more than willing to buy out—" he glanced around "--Angel's share in the business."

Harry shifted restlessly in Scott's chair. "I'm afraid it isn't that easy, Blake. The clause on simultaneous deaths is a little more complicated."

Blake and Angel waited.

"What they decided, in that event, was to keep the shares in the family, so to speak."

"What family, Harry?" Blake asked.

"Uh, yours, Blake. Yours and Angel's. They wanted to be sure that the shares would be used to benefit both of you. Therefore, they have left them in trust to any children born of the marriage of Blake Carlyle and Angel Bennington."

"What?" Blake and Angel said in unison.

"You can't be serious," Blake added.

"That is absolutely ridiculous!" Angel insisted. She glanced agitatedly at Blake for support, then back at Harry. "You are serious, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so," Harry muttered unhappily.

"I won't do it. The whole idea is preposterous."

"Yes," Harry agreed.

She glanced around at Blake. "Did you have something to do with this?"

"Hardly," Blake responded. "If and when I marry I will choose my own wife." *And she will be nothing like you,* he added silently.

Blake pictured Marcia, tall and fashionably thin, her black hair swept back from her fine-featured

face. He had been seeing her for more than two years. No two women could be more unalike.

Not that he had anything against Angel's looks. Although she was tiny, she certainly had all the attributes in the right places. It was her deceptive look of innocence that Blake found most irritating. Raised in France and attending art classes in Paris as a teenager, then living with a bunch of hippie-type artists—she must be experienced, no doubt promiscuous, and he had the urge to tell her to cut out that wide-eyed innocent look, that he, for one, wasn't buying her act.

He had no idea what their fathers had thought they were doing, but he certainly wasn't going to be saddled with a bohemian wife.

Blake gave Harry a level look. "What is the alternative regarding the shares?" he asked.

"That the corporation go public."

"What?" Blake couldn't believe it. "You can't do that."

"No, but your fathers can. And that is exactly what they've instructed me, their executor, to do as soon as the estates are settled."

"I don't believe this." Blake ran his hand through his hair in agitation. *How could you do this to me?* he asked his dearly departed father and his partner. *What have I ever done to deserve this?*

"Could you explain what's wrong with selling the shares?" Angel asked. "Won't that bring in a great deal of money?"

Blake looked disgustedly at her. "Yes, as a matter of fact, it would. But when a company goes public, you lose control. Shareholders come in, and they elect their own directors and officers and chairman. That company was built by our fathers and they trained me to take over eventually. Now, if I don't agree to marry you and father your children, I will lose everything I've worked for. That probably doesn't mean a damned thing to you, does it?" he asked bitterly.

Angel's own aversion to the suggestion paled beside Blake's simmering reaction. He hadn't once raised his voice, but his black eyes burned with the intensity of his emotions, and Angel recognized there were hidden depths to the man.

Whatever could have caused their fathers to think that either one of them would agree to their plan?

She shook her head. This was too much, on the heels of losing her father. She stood. "I won't do it. I don't care about the stupid stock. I don't want a husband. If I did, I would marry a Frenchman—someone who knows about loving and laughter, not some stuffy American businessman who only becomes passionate reading a profit-and-loss statement!"

Angel burst into tears, the strain too much for her. Feeling thoroughly disgraced, she spun around and ran out of the room, slamming the door.

Blake stared at the door for a moment, then back at the man who had dropped the bombshell.

"All right, Harry," he said. "How do you propose we get out of this damned mess!"

*

ANGEL STARED out the wide bay window of the library at the mist and fog. She had never before been in San Francisco without her father's presence for company.

During the three weeks since his death, Angel had put off working here in his library, but today she had forced herself to go through his papers.

Why had he and Todd thought that a marriage between Angel and Blake would work? Did her father feel that she must learn to be less independent? Did Todd think that marriage to Angel would teach Blake that there were other things in life besides the business?

Similar thoughts had been running around in her head along with the question: why? *Oh, Papa, if you could only explain what you hoped to accomplish!*

Angel's painful introspection was interrupted by the phone ringing.

"Angel?"

The voice was deep with a slight rough edge that Angel found soothing and seductive.

"Yes?"

"This is Blake Carlyle."

She felt a slight sense of panic that she couldn't explain.

"I'm sorry I haven't called you sooner. How have you been?"

"As well as could be expected, I suppose."

"Do you have plans for this evening?" he asked.

"No."

"Would you like to have dinner with me?"

The thought of seeing him again caused a slight quivering within her. Was she scared of him? Surely not.

"That would be nice, Blake. When?"

"I will be there as soon after seven as I can make it."

"Fine, I'll see you then."

He sounded so decisive, so used to issuing invitations—and commands, perhaps? Despite herself, Angel was becoming intrigued with the enigmatic Blake Carlyle.

The dress Angel chose to wear for dinner was lime green, with full, sheer sleeves, a V-neck and a full skirt that swirled around her shapely legs. The neckline was a little low, but she shrugged. Blake would probably not even notice.

He was waiting in the hallway when Angel came down the staircase. She couldn't help noticing how striking he appeared in the black suit he wore, but from his grim expression, he didn't appear to be looking forward to their evening.

Angel's smile caught Blake off guard. A sweet shyness fought with the overall impression of sophistication and her first comments added to the confusion.

"I appreciate your willingness to see me again after that awful scene I caused," she said, stopping a few steps from him. "I hope you will forgive my rudeness. I said some really unforgivable things, and I'm sorry."

One corner of Blake's mouth lifted in a half smile. He was totally disarmed by her honesty. He took the hand she held out and squeezed it gently. "You don't owe me an apology, Angel. We were both under a tremendous amount of pressure that day."

They drove down to Fisherman's Wharf and entered one of the restaurants on the water. They were seated at a small table overlooking the bay.

The meal was delicious, but Blake's mind seemed to be elsewhere. Angel wondered what it would take to gain his attention and decided to find out.

"Are you dating anyone, Blake?" she asked.

He glanced at her over the top of his wineglass, startled at the personal question. "Why?"

"Oh, I suppose I'm surprised that you aren't already married, which would have taken care of the present situation."

"The same applies to you. Why aren't *you* married?"

She smiled. "I don't like ties."

I just bet you don't, he thought caustically. "Actually I am seeing someone—Marcia Sinclair."

"What is she like?"

"Tall, slender, beautiful." He eyed her thoughtfully.

The opposite of me. "Why haven't you married her?"

"I thought we had plenty of time," he said bitterly.

"As far as I'm concerned, you have all the time in the world." She gave him her most innocent smile.

"I have had several attorneys going over the papers Harry drew up, trying to find a way out. But short of litigation, which would still not guarantee the results we want, there is nothing we can do."

"I see."

"Do you? Do you care about anybody but yourself and your own pleasures, Angel?"

"Of course I do!"

"I can't understand why your father disliked me so much that he would bribe me to marry you. I suppose he figured that was the only way he could get you married off!"

Angel could feel the anger building within her, but she smiled. "It works both ways, you know. Perhaps I am being bribed to marry you."

Blake's dark eyes blazed with fury.

Aha. So there are some feelings rumbling around inside that calm exterior, Angel decided.

"Is that what you think?"

"Well, why in the world would I marry some stranger and move halfway around the world to live with him and furnish him with children?" She tilted her head slightly. "Unless I'm missing something very essential. Are you very good in bed, perhaps?"

He stared at her, then gritted out, "My prowess in bed is not the issue here."

Angel considered this. "Well, I wouldn't be so quick to discount it, if I were you." She studied him consideringly.

"The issue at the moment has nothing to do with my attributes as a marriage partner."

"Well, you're in luck, then."

"Angel—" How did she do it? How could she sit there looking so innocent and unworldly while making the most outrageous comments? Blake reached over and took her hand.

"Angel, I'm sorry. I'm not handling this conversation very well. This whole situation has been something of a shock to me."

"I understand."

"Thank you. I realize that you have no more interest in marrying me than I have in marrying you."

"Agreed."

"Fine." He sat back in his chair after patting her hand, but in his sudden relief at her understanding, Blake smiled at her. His smile was dazzling. For just a moment Angel had trouble catching her breath. When he forgot to be serious, Blake Carlyle was devastatingly attractive.

Angel stared at him. "Blake?"

"Yes?"

"Are you good in bed?"

"Angel!" Why did her smile unnerve him so? "However," he added slowly, "I do not want the company to go public."

"But you just said—"

"What I said doesn't mean that I don't have every intention of marrying you."

Angel stared at Blake in total disbelief. "But you don't even know me."

"I'm well aware of that, but I want you to understand that I will do whatever I must to keep the company in my control."

"Even marry me."

"Yes. That's why I am proposing that you delay your return to France and give us an opportunity to get better acquainted before the wedding."

"Blake, there will be no wedding!"

"Harry said there was no time limit placed on the marriage and on producing the family."

"I wonder how they missed planning that, as well?" she asked bitterly.

"You've already made it clear that you have no intention of marrying anyone else, so any plans we make would not interfere with your future."

"For the sake of discussion, let's suppose I agreed to your suggestion. Would I be able to live in France after the marriage?"

The waiter refilled their glasses, and Blake was amused to notice that Angel quickly took a drink. She wasn't as composed as she wished him to believe.

He shook his head. "Not right away. If you will recall the terms, we'll need to have at least one child." He raised an eyebrow. "We

would need to live intimately for a while at least."

She set the glass down. "I don't believe this. You don't care that I don't want to marry you."

"Of course I care. It just doesn't change anything. I have no intention of rushing you. We have time—time to let you grow adjusted to life here, time to spend together, and with my friends and business associates, time to make friends of your own." He grinned. "You might even grow to like me."

"On the contrary, Blake, *darling*," she drawled. "It's obvious that I'm no more your idea of a mate than you are mine."

He nodded. "True."

"So perhaps you will even grow to like me."

"The idea does show considerable merit." He glanced at his watch. "Are you ready to go?"

When they reached her home, Blake helped Angel out of the car, walked her up the steps and escorted her inside. He slipped her jacket from her shoulders, and she turned to him uncertainly.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thanks. I need to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

"All right."

She looked like a young girl standing there in her sophisticated gown, and without giving his actions much thought, Blake placed his hands on her shoulders, cupping them, and leaned down to give her a quick peck on the lips. He was never certain how the kiss changed to something more.

Angel moved closer to him, her arms creeping up and around his neck, her mouth fitting his perfectly. When he felt her pressed against him Blake seemed to forget who she was. Instead, his body began to signal an attraction to the woman in his arms, and he tightened his hold, pulling her even closer.

Her mouth parted slightly, her tongue flicking mischievously against his sensual lower lip, and their mouths merged, their tongues lightly fencing.

Angel couldn't understand what was happening to her. Never had she responded to a man in such a way. Everywhere their bodies touched seemed to be lit with a flame.

Angel was in way over her head. She knew so little about men—and now she was getting all her lessons rolled up into one dynamite package.

Blake's hand unconsciously searched for and found Angel's breast, and he softly slid his fingers around its fullness. It was only when he heard her soft moan that he realized what he was doing.

My God! Are you out of your mind? This is Angel Bennington you're caressing. Slowly he withdrew his hand, but his lips seemed to have a will of their own.

It was Angel who finally broke the contact. "Good night, Blake," she managed to murmur.

He stood there; wondering if San Francisco was being threatened by another quake. Why were

his knees so shaky, and why did he have this intense urge to gather her back into his arms and carry her up that long, winding staircase to the first available bed?

"Good night, Angel," he muttered.

Blake got back into his car and drove off. He had been with many women, but had never reacted to one so intensely before. He tried to think of Marcia but couldn't seem to remember what she looked like. Instead, all he could see were large dark blue eyes and flaming red hair.

The strain of the past few weeks had finally caught up with him. He must be losing his mind.

*

HARRY INSISTED on hosting the engagement party honoring the children of his two closest friends. Blake obligingly left the details in Harry's capable hands and devoted himself to the familiar world of cutthroat corporate maneuvering.

Angel, meanwhile, was faced with her success in the art world and her insistence on anonymity. Michelle had forwarded her mail from Paris, and on the Thursday before the party, she discovered a letter from her agent about a San Francisco gallery that wanted to have a showing of AB's paintings.

Impossible. There were not enough available paintings unless she spent the next few months totally devoted to her work. Sinking into the comfortable chair by the

library fireplace, Angel realized what she was telling herself. Her career was already being shoved to the background to make way for her marriage.

"No!" She glanced around, then scanned her agent's letter again. They were proposing a June showing. That would give her almost five months. She had a couple of paintings nearing completion here, more in Paris. If she left next week and worked eighteen-hour days, she just might do it. If not, she might be able to borrow some of her paintings from their owners.

The clock on the mantel chimed softly, and Angel remembered she had intended to go shopping for a dress for Saturday night. "What a waste of time," she muttered. She hated to shop when she needed something.

Several hours later she had about given up. But when she saw the shimmering white gown, Angel knew her search was over. Its iridescence emphasized the superb cut and style, and when she tried it on, she smiled brilliantly.

Blake did not see the full effect of Angel's gown until they arrived at the hotel ballroom. He helped her off with her floor-length satin cape, and when she turned around he caught his breath. Her dress seemed to drape across her breasts, their rounded fullness apparently the only thing keeping it up. The rest of the dress looked as though it had been sewn on her, the soft

white changing subtly into colors every time she breathed.

"Angel, my dear, you look absolutely stunning," Harry said. "Doesn't she, Blake?"

"Stunning," he muttered half under his breath.

"You look very young and virginal, I must say," Harry enthused. "Just what you'd expect of a newly engaged young lady."

If that dress was Harry's idea of a virginal gown, it was no wonder he had never married. He knew nothing about women, Blake decided.

Harry glanced around the room with satisfaction. "I'm really pleased with the way everything looks. Todd and Scott would be proud to be here with us tonight." He took Angel's hand. "Why don't we go over by the door and meet people as they come in?" He tucked her small hand into the bend of his elbow and escorted her across the room, leaving Blake to follow.

Almost an hour later the room was filled with laughing people enjoying themselves, everyone eager to get to know Blake's chosen wife better. They were just leaving the receiving line when Blake's best friend arrived.

"It's about time, Jeremy. I thought you decided to forgo the pleasure of our company this evening."

"Not on your life," the good-looking blond man replied. "The day Blake Carlyle introduces us to his soon-to-be bride is the day I

break all speed records getting back from L.A." He stared expectantly at Angel.

Blake kept his arm around her waist. "Angel, I want you to meet the fellow whom I've spent a lifetime trying to keep out of trouble. This is Jeremy Jordan, the Fourth."

Angel took Jeremy's hand and smiled. She felt Blake stiffen.

Jeremy glanced at his friend, recognizing the scowl that was forming. He ignored it. "Are you sure you want to marry this guy, Angel? Wouldn't you prefer a more lighthearted, fun-loving companion?"

Angel laughed delightedly. Jeremy was just what she needed after the past few dismal weeks. His blue eyes twinkled with mischief as she shook her head, wearing a mock-sorrowful expression.

"I'm so sorry, Jeremy, but you see, I was promised to Blake from the cradle. Our families brought us up to think only of each other as a mate."

Blake stared at her in dismay. Did she intend to admit the truth of their marriage to Jeremy? She had come damned close with her silly story.

Jeremy bowed. "Then if you will not honor me with your hand, how about a dance, milady?"

"I'd love to, Jeremy. Thank you so much." She smiled innocently at Blake. "If you'll excuse us . . ."

Blake stared at his fiancée and his former best friend inimically, then headed for the bar.

Harry had watched the unfolding scene from a safe distance, delighted to see that Blake was not having things all his own way. He needed to learn flexibility, and Harry had a hunch Angel was just the person to teach him.

No one could deny that Angel was an overwhelming success that evening. Blake's friends were enchanted, if somewhat startled, by his choice of wife. All who attended the party found themselves basking in the glow of her warm personality.

All except Blake. Jeremy found him standing near the bar watching the crowd surrounding Angel, while she tried to decide whom she had agreed to dance with next.

"I believe your choice of bride is a smash hit with all your friends, old buddy."

Blake glanced around. "So it would seem."

"Have you danced with her yet?"

"I didn't want to fight the mob."

Jeremy laughed. "Don't tell me you're jealous of the attention she's getting!"

"No. I just wish she didn't look quite so flashy."

"Angel? Surely you jest. Her gown is in the best taste. It goes very well with her coloring."

Blake watched as Angel did an energetic fast dance with a fellow Blake had always considered a good friend—until now. He took another sip of his drink.

"I don't suppose Marcia took the news of your engagement well. I haven't had a chance to talk with you since you dropped the bombshell on all of us."

"No, she didn't. Since she's the only woman I've been seeing, it was natural that she might expect me to marry her if I ever married anyone." Blake felt uncomfortable every time he was reminded of Marcia.

Jeremy nodded. "That was a common supposition for all of us. But now that I've had a chance to meet Angel I can certainly see why you snapped her up. Actually, I'd never realized what exquisite taste you have, Blake. I'm impressed."

Blake said nothing. Instead, he continued to watch as Angel began dancing a slow number with another one of his ex-friends.

Jeremy waved his hand in front of Blake's face. "You still here, Blake?"

Blake glanced around. "What?"

"Oh, nothing. Just trying to make conversation. You've really got it bad, haven't you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

When the music ended, Angel turned to find Blake standing directly in front of her. "I believe it's my turn, isn't it?" he asked in a husky tone. The orchestra was playing a medley of love songs, and she glided into his arms, tilting her head back to look up at him.

"I didn't think you liked to dance," she murmured.

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"My first clue was that the band has been playing for two hours, and this is the first time you've danced."

"I decided to be patient and wait my turn. Now the others will have to learn patience." He pulled her even closer, and she flowed against him, relaxing and letting the music fill her mind and senses.

They spent the rest of the evening together and no one even attempted to separate them. The clock was softly chiming two when they returned to her home, where a soft fire still flickered in the library fireplace. The room felt warm and cozy.

"Would you like some coffee?" Angel asked, sinking down on the love seat and slipping off her shoes.

Blake sat down next to her, pulling her small feet into his lap and massaging them. "Not really."

"Oh, that feels good. I can't remember having danced so much in one evening."

"I would have guessed you went out when you lived in Paris."

"Not really. We spent more time talking and arguing the merits of artists than we did dancing."

His hand slid up her leg and began to knead the muscle in her calf. "You take your art very seriously, don't you?"

Angel slowly relaxed. "Yes, I do."

"I wouldn't want you to give it up just because you'll be moving here to the States."

"Oh, I would never do that. Painting is too much a part of me."

He gently lifted her, settling her on his lap. "Would you show me some of your work sometime?" His mouth found the soft tender spot just beneath her ear.

She nodded, trying to find her voice. "If you want to see it."

His lips moved across her cheek. "I do. Very much."

Her warm scent filled his senses, and Blake tilted her face up to his so that his lips found hers. He pulled her closer, feeling the rapid beat of her heart against his chest.

The fine material of her dress was no barrier, and Blake's hand slid underneath, confirming what he had suspected all evening. She wore nothing else. Cupping her firm breast in his large hand, he stroked its smooth surface, feeling the nipple contract into a hard knot.

Angel moaned softly, giving Blake the opportunity to deepen the kiss even further, his tongue darting into the slight opening of her sweetly swollen lips. She tasted so good. He wanted her. He couldn't remember ever having wanted someone so much.

But not tonight, you idiot. What sort of Neanderthal will she think you are? You've made it clear the marriage is one of convenience, but you can't keep your hands off her!

Blake slackened his hold and stared down at her. What was happening to him? Was she some sort of witch who had cast a spell on him? Some "angel"! She was the most unheavenly angel he would ever meet.

He pulled her head down so that she snuggled her face into his neck and they sat there together, trying to get their breath. Blake lost track of time.

"Are you still leaving on Tuesday?" he finally asked.

"Yes."

"Do you want me to take you to the airport?"

"No."

"How about having dinner with me on Monday?"

She nodded, still too shaken over what had occurred between the two of them to be able to speak.

Blake stood up, allowing her to slide slowly down the length of his body. Heat rushed to her face when she felt his obvious arousal. Angel wasn't used to such close contact with a man. Jean-Pierre was the only other man she had been around besides her father, and he treated her like a kid sister. Blake, on the other hand, treated her as though she were an experienced woman. Surely there must be some middle ground.

"I'll pick you up on Monday at seven, all right?" he asked.

She nodded.

He bent over and kissed her softly on the mouth. She looked like a sleepy little girl, hair mussed

from his fingers, eyelids half-closed. "Good night, Angel."

"Good night." Her hand trailed down the side of his cheek in a fond gesture of which she was unaware.

He smiled.

*

PARIS HAD LOST its charm for Angel. If she hadn't been so busy she might have ended up moping, but she spent every possible minute at her easel.

Angel was surprised to discover that she missed Blake, but no more surprised than her roommates were at her agreeing to marry an American.

"You? Get married? You can't be serious!" Suzanne exclaimed.

"Oh, but I am, Suzanne. Very serious."

Michelle shook her head. "It is because you have lost your father. But there is no substitute for a father's love, Angel. Surely you must know that."

"Believe me, Michelle, Blake Carlyle is nothing like my father."

"But, *cherie*," Suzanne questioned gently, "how can you know this is what you want? You just met the man."

"I know."

"And you've always made it clear that you never intended to marry," Michelle added.

"I know."

The two Frenchwomen looked at each other and shrugged.

"I really think I'm in love," Angel finally admitted.

"*You think!* Well, for God's sake, don't marry this man until you're sure!" Michelle insisted.

Angel shook her head. "The wedding date is set. We are definitely getting married. But I'm also having a show in San Francisco in June, so I want to do as many paintings as possible before I go back."

"Is there nothing we can say to make you change your mind?"

She smiled. "No. But thank you both for caring. If you were to meet him, perhaps you'd understand." Even if she could scarcely understand it herself.

BLAKE ARRIVED at the San Francisco airport almost an hour early. He had been too restless to stay at the office. He had talked with Angel several times over the past few weeks. He had gotten into the habit of sharing his days with her and insisting on hearing about hers. She had told him that she was staying busy painting, but he was afraid to ask how her friends had taken the news that she was moving away. He particularly didn't want to know about her male friends' reactions.

Blake had determinedly put out of his mind all thought of the other men in her life. He recognized that once she had made the commitment to marry him she would be loyal. He knew that because he recognized more and more how like her father Angel truly was.

Not long after she had left, Blake had tried to picture her liv-

ing in his father's home. He couldn't. Dark, heavy drapes had covered all the windows, and the massive mahogany furniture had towered in every room.

All of that was gone now. In their place were golden tones, sheer drapes and modern, comfortable furniture. He hoped she approved—or perhaps he should have waited for her to do the decorating. Oh, well, if she didn't like it, she could always have it done over.

When Angel's flight was announced over the loudspeaker, Blake felt his heartbeat quicken. He would be seeing her in just a few minutes. And in less than two weeks, they would be married. Blake no longer thought about the original reasons for their marriage.

He stood back from the entrance where she would be deplaning—and then he saw her, her bright head shining in the sea of nameless faces. He started moving toward her, was only a few feet away when he noticed the man with his arm tucked in hers, talking rapidly. She was looking up at him, laughing at whatever he was saying.

Just before they reached him, Blake took in the man's brown curly hair, broad shoulders and casual dress.

Angel glanced up. "Blake! I didn't know you were going to meet my plane. How wonderful!" She threw herself into his arms and kissed him exuberantly. Then she

grabbed his arm and turned to the other man. "Blake, I want you to meet Jean-Pierre Armand, who insisted on coming over with me. He wants to meet the man who finally convinced me to marry him."

Blake numbly shook hands as Jean-Pierre said, "I'm so very pleased to meet you, Monsieur Carlyle. Angel has told us so much about you."

She laughed. "I believe Suzanne and Michelle were delighted to get me out of there. I was getting very boring, I'm sure."

The Frenchman looked down at her with obvious affection. "Never that, *chérie*."

"Of course you must say that, Jean-Pierre. Otherwise you might not have a place to stay!"

Blake stared at the two of them in bewilderment, but Angel explained, "Since Jean-Pierre spent most of his money for his plane ticket, I told him he could stay with me. There are several excellent contacts for him here, and he was so concerned about me that I suggested he come along and meet you, as well."

"He's going to stay with you?" Blake repeated.

Angel gave him a slight smile. "And why not? With five bedrooms and even more baths, I doubt we'll be crowded."

"I see." His mind was whirling. "So you intend to live with Jean-Pierre until we get married?" Blake asked carefully.

Was it possible that Blake was jealous? The thought boosted Angel's spirits considerably.

"Why not?" she asked blandly.

Jean-Pierre began to laugh. "Ah, Angel, don't you understand? Your fiancé thinks that you and I are sleeping together." He looked at Blake. "Isn't that so?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," Blake said. He stepped back to allow Angel to enter the baggage-claim area.

"I have known Angel since she was practically an infant," Jean-Pierre explained patiently. "I became her self-appointed guardian when she first arrived at school, and it has become a habit with me, I'm afraid. However, I'm more than willing to allow you the privilege, Monsieur Carlyle. You show a great deal of courage in undertaking the task of looking after Angel."

"Nonsense. I don't need anyone to look after me."

The men steadily met each other's gaze, and recognized a common bond. As though they had just met, Blake stuck his hand out again. "Please call me Blake."

Jean-Pierre nodded with Gallic dignity. "Thank you. You must, of course, call me Jean-Pierre."

Blake still didn't like the idea of Jean-Pierre's staying with Angel, but he knew better than to try to veto the plan. Angel's independence was one of her most endearing traits. Usually.

THE DAY OF THE wedding was typical for San Francisco. The fog didn't burn off until almost noon, but by midafternoon the sun glinted off the water and brought a sense of hope to Angel.

Harry picked her up and drove her to the small church where she was to meet Blake and Jeremy. Jean-Pierre had refused her invitation, explaining that a private wedding was just that and, besides, he had to finish work on a sculpture.

During the recent weeks of preparing for her art show she had tried not to think about the permanent commitment she was making. Now that was all she could think about.

Angel knew that she would never have agreed to marry Blake if she hadn't been more than half-way in love with him, but the very thought of loving him, and being vulnerable to him, frightened her.

Still, Angel respected her father's judgment, and if he thought their marriage would work, she had to try.

Harry reached over and patted her clasped hands. "This will all work out fine, Angel. Wait and see."

"I hope so," she murmured.

"I think Blake will make you a fine husband. He's got a great deal of character and integrity, you know."

"I'm not worried about Blake, I'm just not sure how well suited I am to being a wife," Angel admitted. "My art has been my life. I

know nothing about making someone happy."

"Just be yourself, Angel. That's all anyone can do."

"It would be different if Blake loved me, Harry. He would be more tolerant of me."

"And what makes you think he doesn't love you?"

She glanced at him, startled. "Of course he doesn't love me. You know why Blake is marrying me."

Harry nodded. "Yes, I know why Blake *thinks* he's marrying you. As for how he feels about you... Blake was never encouraged to show his emotions as a young child. He still distrusts and ignores them, just as he is doing now." Harry smiled. "He's fascinated by you, Angel. He's never known anyone like you. When he talks about you—which is quite often—he's wistful. Try to understand him, Angel. He needs lots of it. Perhaps eventually he will be able to understand himself."

They pulled up in front of the church. Blake was standing talking with Jeremy, but when he saw the car he strode to the curb.

"Hello," he said, helping Angel out. She had decided that, for her one and only wedding, she would wear white. She certainly had the right to do so. Her dress was street length, lace over satin, and she wore a tiny hat, leaving her hair to fall loosely to her shoulders.

Blake looked marvelous in his formal clothes.

"I wanted to be sure you had flowers," he said, handing her a small arrangement of white rosebuds, pink sweetheart roses and baby's breath.

Angel buried her nose in them, trying to find something to say. She was touched by his thoughtfulness and bemused by what Harry had told her.

Blake and Angel were married in the small chapel with Harry and Jeremy their only witnesses. Blake provided matching wedding bands, and Angel fought back tears when she thought of her father, who had wanted to make sure she was taken care of. *Oh, Papa, if only you were here with me now. Tell me how to be a wife to Blake. I want this marriage to work.*

After the vows were exchanged, they were pronounced husband and wife and Blake was told to kiss the bride. Angel looked up at him, and Blake felt as though a hand had squeezed his heart. Tilting her chin with his finger, he placed his lips on hers and sealed the union with a silent vow to treat her gently so that she would never be sorry for the sacrifice she was making—marrying a man she didn't love.

Angel's heart was thumping so strongly it shook her whole body. She was now Mrs. Blake Carlyle—for better or for worse. And when he kissed her, she thought her knees were going to buckle.

Blake turned back to the pastor and offered his hand. "Thank you for your time, sir."

The man smiled. "I'm glad to be of service." He took Angel's hand. "Mrs. Carlyle, I wish you the very best, and my blessings go with you both."

Harry cleared his throat. "Well, if that's it, I have to get back to the office."

"I certainly wouldn't want to keep you from important business, Harry," Angel teased.

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm just sorry you wouldn't let me hold a reception for you."

Jeremy spoke up. "Well, I'm going to allow the newlyweds their honeymoon, and when they return, we are going to have one hell of a party."

"But Jeremy—" Blake started to say.

"I don't want to hear it." Jeremy held up his hand. "The deed is done, arrangements have been made. The only thing you two need to do is show up."

After they waved goodbye, Blake and Angel got into his car. He turned toward her. "Are you hungry?"

She shook her head.

"Neither am I. I never realized how nerve-racking getting married could be."

His wry comment caused Angel to relax somewhat.

"I thought we might drive down the coast this week, if you would like. Have you seen much of it?"

"Not since I was very young."

"There's a very nice resort about four hours south of here. I thought we could stay there tonight."

"I'd like that."

During the scenic drive Angel began to think about the night ahead of them. Would Blake make love to her? She wasn't sure how she felt about the subject. He was her husband now, and the purpose of the marriage was to have a child. There was no reason to postpone intimacy.

Suzanne and Michelle had given her an outrageously expensive nightgown for her wedding night. She had tried it on and blushed. It was gossamer sheer. Except for a tie on either side of the waist, the gown was open from shoulder to ankle. Angel wondered if she dare wear it tonight.

AFTER DINNER, Blake and Angel sat in front of a large bay window, enjoying the view of the Pacific Ocean. Neither had had much of an appetite and Angel sipped on her after-dinner liqueur, hoping it would relax her.

"Are you tired?" Blake finally broke the silence.

"A little."

"Are you ready to go upstairs?"

She caught her lower lip between her teeth for a moment, then nodded. She wished she had all the experience he attributed to her.

Blake took her hand, surprised to feel how cold it was. Once in their room, he went over to the fireplace and began to build a small fire. Angel tried to ignore the massive king-size bed.

He glanced around. "Go ahead and use the bathroom, if you'd like."

Angel gathered up her gown and robe. Perhaps a bath would help to relax her.

It did. The warm water combined with the dinnertime beverages almost put her to sleep, and she slipped lazily into her gown and robe. When she opened the bathroom door Angel found Blake sitting in front of the fire. He glanced up and smiled.

"Feel better?" She looked like a child, her hair in a tousled top-knot.

"Yes. I can barely keep my eyes open."

He stood up. "Come sit here by the fire while I shower." He took her hand and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "I'll be right back."

Angel soon became mesmerized by the flickering firelight, her mind drifting.

Moments later, she heard the bathroom door open and glanced around. Angel caught her breath. Blake walked out, still towel-drying his hair, wearing only a small pair of briefs that emphasized more than they concealed. His body was bronzed, with hard, well-toned muscles. Dressed, Blake was impressive. Stripped, he took her breath away. He sat beside her.

"Enjoying the fire?"

"Very much."

He grinned and stood up, pulling her to her feet. "Do you really need this robe?" he asked, gently untying the sash.

Mute, she shook her head.

He slid his hands to her shoulders and pushed the smooth material off her arms so that it fell in a satin circle around her feet. His breath caught. Bathed in the fire-light, Angel looked like part of the flames with her bright hair and fair skin. Her gown was so sheer that it scarcely made a shadow on her. He tried not to think about the number of men who had seen her like that.

Without a word Blake picked her up in his arms and carried her over to the bed. Reaching for the ribbon that held her hair, he untied it, then spread the rich tones of flame around her shoulders.

Her eyes seemed unusually large, and if he didn't know better, Blake would have said her expression was apprehensive. Stretching out beside Angel, he gently turned her toward him. Her gown fell open, exposing the warm curve of her hip and thigh. He took in the picture she made of innocent seductiveness as he began to stroke along her hip, back and forth between her waist and thigh. Her skin felt like satin.

Slowly he leaned toward her, kissing her on her nose, cheek and lips. He could feel her starting to relax and he took his time. When the gown got in the way of his explorations, he sat up, tugging it gently from her. "I want to see you, Angel," he said in a husky voice.

Slowly he began kissing her, the light, affectionate caresses eventu-

ally deepening into long, soul-searching expressions of possession.

Angel was soon lost in the sensations Blake was creating. His hands seemed to know just how to evoke a response from her, and she shivered with the unfamiliar feelings.

"Are you cold?" he whispered.

"No, I feel as though I'm burning up."

'She could feel more than hear his chuckle. "I don't want you to catch a cold from overexposure." He placed his thigh over her, his knee resting comfortably between her legs.

Angel felt his arousal against her. She didn't have to wonder if he wanted her. Her hands hesitantly stroked across his chest and down his abdomen. She felt him quiver at her touch. Then he removed his last article of clothing, giving her silent permission to caress him.

He groaned when her hand brushed against him and she jerked away, uncertain. Then he was kneeling between her legs.

Blake had waited for months for this moment and could wait no longer. He wanted Angel so badly he shook with it as his mouth found hers once again, his tongue imitating the movements of love-making, his arms holding her tightly against him.

Angel's arms crept around his neck, and she gave herself up to him, knowing that Blake Carlyle was the man she had been waiting

for all her life, at peace because she had let him show her the intricate mysteries of lovemaking.

Blake suddenly pulled his head back and stared down at her in confusion. She smiled up at him.

"Angel?" He was bewildered. All of his preconceived ideas had just gone up in smoke. Blake had discovered that his new bride was a virgin.

A fierce surge of protective possession flooded Blake as he realized that all of his imaginings of Angel with other men had been wrong. Her look of innocence had not been faked. She had never given herself to another man.

Until now. She had responded to his lovemaking, allowing him intimacies that no other man had known.

Angel felt him pause and forced herself to relax. Suzanne had told her the first time might be uncomfortable unless she relaxed.

Her arms tightened. Blake deepened their kiss as he took possession of her. After a brief moment of discomfort Angel was aware of nothing else but Blake. Tiny pinpricks of light seemed to burst within her, causing her to respond to his rhythm with a slight arching of her back. She felt so protected, wrapped securely in his arms. He paused, his mouth blazing a burning trail down her neck to her breast, and Angel forgot to breathe. The tiny lights began to grow larger until they burst into flames, wrapping them both in incandescent light.

"Oh, Blake," she murmured as once again his mouth found hers, and he held her to him until he brought them both to a peak where they tumbled in a sea of sensuous satisfaction.

Angel had found her home—in Blake's arms.

*

IT WAS LATE Sunday evening when they arrived back in San Francisco. Their week together seemed more like a dream to Angel. She hated to see it end.

When they entered Blake's family home, Angel looked around in amazement. She remembered the house as very dark and somber. Now it was full of light and color.

"Blake, this is beautiful. How long has it been this way?"

"They just finished it. I thought you'd prefer it."

"You mean you had this redone for me?"

"Mmm-hmm." He took her hand and started toward the stairs. "Might as well show you everything." He went down a long hallway lined with doors to one that opened to reveal another flight of steps.

Blake had rebuilt the top floor, creating a loft effect with a giant skylight.

"Oh, Blake," she said softly. He had remodeled his home for her, even though he had never taken her painting all that seriously. She threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you so much." Angel

stood on her toes and kissed him fiercely.

He smiled. "Actually, I had an ulterior motive. I never did like the idea of you and Jean-Pierre working in such close harmony."

Angel laughed. "You almost sound jealous."

"I do, don't I?" Blake grinned. "What do you know?" He picked her up and started down the stairway. "Your other surprise can wait."

"What is it?"

"Well—I got you a small car to run around in."

"What kind? A Renault? A Volkswagen?"

"A Mercedes coupe."

"Blake!"

"I told the dealer I wanted it in sapphire blue, to match your eyes."

"That has to be the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me."

"That's not romantic. I was just being practical."

"Of course you were."

"Aren't you ready to go to bed yet?" he asked hopefully.

She tightened her arms around his neck as he pushed the door open to his bedroom. "Oh, yes. I'm absolutely exhausted," she said with a tiny smile.

"Oh." He tried to hide his disappointment.

She started laughing. "Not *that* exhausted, Blake," she added, and they ended up in a flurry of clothes and bed covers. Blake gave Angel a very warm welcome home.

ANGEL WAS in her studio the next day when Foster, who had run the household for years, tapped on the door.

"You have a phone call, Mrs. Carlyle. Miss Marcia Sinclair."

Angel glanced around in surprise. "She asked to speak to *me*?"

Foster was impassive. "That is correct."

Hastily cleaning her hands, she took the call.

"Angel. I hope I'm not interrupting you," Marcia said in a hesitant voice.

"That's all right."

"I was calling to see if you and Blake were going to be home this evening."

"As far as I know."

A slight note of excitement crept into Marcia's voice. "I would very much like to bring your wedding gift over. I can't wait to show you what I found!"

"Certainly, Marcia. Could you make it around eight?"

"Fine. I'll see you both then."

"WHAT DO YOU mean, Marcia will be here in a few minutes?" Blake stared at Angel.

"I'm afraid your caveman tactics when you first got home tonight distracted me. I forgot about her phone call."

They had finished their meal and were sitting in the library drinking coffee.

Blake frowned. "I don't understand why you invited her over here."

"She said she had a wedding gift for us. I could see no reason to be rude to her."

Blake got up and went over to the bar. Angel thought she heard him mutter, "Just what I need."

"Does it bother you to see her?"

Bother him? No. But Marcia was a reminder of a situation he hadn't handled well. He felt embarrassed.

Marcia arrived carrying a large, flat, wrapped package, which she leaned against a chair.

"It's good to see you again, Marcia. You're looking well. How's Richard?" Blake asked.

She shrugged slightly. "Father is always the same. You know how he is."

"Yes."

The look on her face made Angel stop breathing for a moment. Despite the routine conversation, Marcia's face glowed with love. Blake would have to be blind not to see it.

"I still can't believe my luck," Marcia began. She motioned to the package. "I found it tucked away in a small shop. The owner had no idea what he had—or I probably couldn't have afforded it." She stopped. "I hope you like it."

Angel glanced at Blake, wishing she knew what he was thinking. At the moment he appeared more like the stranger she married than the man she had spent the previous week with.

She began to unwrap what was obviously a large painting.

"I thought you might want it for your den, Blake," Marcia suggested, "as a nice finishing touch to all this remodeling."

When Angel uncovered the painting she froze.

Marcia nervously continued her monologue. "Yes, it is an AB original. Isn't it marvelous? I understand it's one of his earlier works, but you can see the genius there, can't you?" She smiled at Angel. "I wanted to give you both something you could enjoy."

Angel didn't know what to do. What did you say to someone who gave you one of your own paintings?

Marcia walked over to Blake, touching his arm slightly. "I've saved the best for last. The artist is having a show here next month, and I managed to get tickets for the preopening." She reached into her purse for two tickets.

Angel knew she had to get out of there for a few minutes. She needed to think. Quickly gathering up the wrappings, she said in complete honesty, "I'm overwhelmed." Going to the door, she muttered, "I'll be right back."

As soon as the door closed, Marcia turned to Blake. "Are you upset with me for coming over?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. I appreciate your thoughtfulness. The picture is very beautiful."

"Oh, Blake, please don't pretend with me." She walked over to him. "You see, I know."

"You know what?"

"Why you married Angel."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, Blake, you know how Father is. He wouldn't leave it alone. He couldn't understand why you suddenly decided to marry." She took his hand and squeezed it. "Father found out about the agreement your father made with Angel's. But I'll wait for you, Blake, however long it takes."

He stared at Marcia with alarm. "But, Marcia, you don't understand—"

"Yes, I do. I understand you don't love her and that she probably doesn't love you. I can't see her staying here in San Francisco permanently, can you?"

Marcia had touched on the fear that haunted Blake.

"I don't know," he admitted finally.

"Just remember that I'll be here."

Angel heard Marcia's last remark when she reentered the room and saw the look of pain on Blake's face. What had she interrupted?

"I asked Foster for some fresh coffee. It should be in shortly." Angel had decided to tell them who she was. It was only fair that she tell Marcia, since she'd given them the painting and the tickets.

Except Marcia didn't give her the chance.

"Oh, I'm sorry, but I can't stay," she said nervously. She glanced at Blake, then at Angel. "I just wanted you to have the painting."

"Thank you," Blake said gently, wishing there was some way to tell her that even if Angel left him, they could never take up their old relationship.

Angel heard the gentleness in his voice and wanted to cry. Clearly both she and Marcia loved Blake, and she was beginning to think that whatever emotions he had were being pulled between them.

Blake walked Marcia to the door and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Don't wait for me, Marcia. You're going to make a very deserving man a marvelous wife."

She smiled up at him, her eyes filled with tears. "Good night, Blake."

He watched her get into her car. He cared about her, but he didn't love her. And the woman he wanted to love him had married him only to fulfill an agreement.

Angel was waiting for him in the library. In a deliberately bright voice, she said, "I can see that I might as well confess my secret."

"What are you talking about?"

"I am the painter known as AB. I had no idea what to say to Marcia just now. Should I have told her?"

Blake stared at her in shock. "Unbelievable."

"But true."

"Then you're having a show here?"

"Yes. I spent my entire time in Paris painting like a fiend. I've got to meet with the proprietor of the gallery this week to make final arrangements."

A chill had come into the room, and Angel had no intention of teasing Blake into warming her up, a joke that they had kept going during the past week.

Her emotions were totally involved with him, but she recognized that he would never allow himself to get that close to her. She almost felt sorry for Marcia and wondered if Blake would be as cool and distant to her someday.

As soon as she produced his child, he would no doubt feel their bargain was complete.

WITHIN A FEW short weeks, Blake and Angel seemed to be absorbed into their former lives. Blake continued to work long hours and came home distracted and quiet. Angel hesitated to tell him about her own busy schedule preparing for her art show.

The truth was that neither one knew how to behave toward the other, and Angel decided that Blake was bored with her. It was only at night when he hungrily reached for her that she felt he might not be sorry they had married. Even then she sometimes wondered if he was only hoping to make sure she became pregnant as soon as possible.

She didn't know what she would have done without Jean-Pierre. He helped her by running errands, hunting down frame shops, encouraging her, insisting she eat. He accompanied her to the galleries and to meetings with Huntington,

the gallery owner. Slowly, but surely everything was shaping up.

Jeremy was the first person to say something to Blake.

"What's happening on the home front? You haven't mentioned Angel in days." They were having lunch together.

"There's nothing much to mention. We're both busy. We don't see all that much of each other."

"You're a fool. You're treating your marriage like some business merger. If I didn't know you so damned well I'd be tempted to believe the rumors."

"What rumors?"

"That you married Angel to get your hands on her stock."

Blake studied his friend. "A rumor like that isn't too surprising. Everyone knows we didn't know each other long before we married."

"And neither of you help to dispel the rumors. You spend every waking moment at your office while Angel's seen all over town with an adoring Frenchman."

Blake stiffened. "Jean-Pierre."

"You mean you're aware of him?"

"He's a friend of hers visiting from France."

"And you don't even care? You really are a cold-blooded bastard, aren't you, Blake? Maybe the rumors are true. So long as you have the stock, you don't care what she's doing." Jeremy threw down his napkin in disgust and pushed back his chair.

Blake stood up with Jeremy. "Hey, fella, calm down a minute and let's talk, okay?"

Jeremy stared at his friend for a moment, then sheepishly sat down. Blake signaled for more coffee.

"I didn't mean to give you the impression that I don't care what Angel is doing. I do. Very much. It's just that Angel needs her freedom. She knows she can return to France if she isn't happy here. I want her to be happy and stay. So I don't want to play the heavy-handed husband. And Jean-Pierre isn't her lover."

"How the hell can you possibly know that?"

"Because I know Angel. She is very loyal."

"I can't believe this conversation."

"Just because I can calmly discuss this doesn't mean I'm handling my feelings all that well," Blake admitted wryly. "I'm jealous as hell."

Jeremy grinned. "So you *have* been thinking of Angel and her friend?"

"There's never a time when I'm not thinking about her, what she's doing, who she's seeing. I'm well aware of Jean-Pierre. But she never mentions him, so I haven't brought him up, either."

"Have you told her how you feel?"

"Certainly not! I'm afraid to tell her what I'm feeling and what it's doing to me. If I end up issuing some crazy ultimatum, I'm not at all sure she'd stay. I bet you find it

all very amusing, but I happen to be in love with Angel."

"You think I don't know that? But you sure as hell don't act like it, and I have a sneaky hunch you've never told her, either."

"We don't have that sort of relationship."

"Oh, I can believe that. You're behaving as if you haven't gotten past the hand-holding stage yet."

Blake flushed slightly. "Oh, we've progressed further than that."

"Thank God." He leaned closer, speaking in a confidential tone. "Will you take some advice from an old friend? Go home and tell your wife you love her and that you're jealous as hell that she's spending so much time with that French guy. It's the only way."

"Maybe you're right, Jeremy."

"I know I'm right. 'Faint heart never won fair lady.' You've already won her. You just forgot to claim her."

"I DON'T KNOW what to do, Jean-Pierre," Angel admitted that afternoon, as they walked along a path in the Chinese gardens. "He shows no interest in what I'm doing. He rarely gets home until nine—sometimes even later. And when I ask him how things are going, he gives me a vague answer."

"Angel, don't you think you may be overreacting a little? You knew the sort of man he was when you married him," Jean-Pierre pointed out with undeniable logic.

Angel nodded. "Yes, I did. But he seemed so different on our honeymoon."

Jean-Pierre laughed. "No man should be judged by his behavior during his honeymoon!"

She smiled reluctantly. "I mean that he was more open and friendly—we seemed to have so much to talk about, so much to share. He seemed relaxed and happy. Lately his mind seems to be somewhere else."

"Why, hello, Angel! I thought that was you!"

Angel glanced around in surprise. Marcia stood at the intersection of two paths, looking very composed.

"Hello, Marcia. I didn't see you."

Marcia's smile widened. "Oh, that's all right. I almost hated to interrupt." Her gaze fell on Jean-Pierre.

"Marcia, I would like you to meet a friend of mine from France, Jean-Pierre Armand. I've been showing him San Francisco," she explained.

"I'm so pleased to meet you. I've heard so much about you."

Jean-Pierre took her proffered hand. "How do you do? How is it you have heard about me?"

Marcia laughed. "Oh, all of Blake's friends have been talking about the two of you. They don't understand the situation."

Angel felt a tremor of alarm. Had she been indiscreet in being seen with Jean-Pierre so much?

Blake had never said anything to her.

"What situation?" Angel asked faintly.

"Why, the reason behind your marriage. I know about the will," she whispered, as though conspiring. She glanced at Jean-Pierre. "Do you intend to stay here in the States until Angel can return to France with you?"

Jean-Pierre stared at the woman as though he couldn't understand a word she said.

Angel understood only too well. Blake had told Marcia the truth about their marriage. No wonder he had told her she could return to France.

Her head seemed to be whirling with bits and pieces of conversations she had shared with Blake. She had heard only what she wanted to hear. She had interpreted his lovemaking to mean he wanted her to stay with him. How foolish of her!

Forcing herself to concentrate, she said, "I hope you will excuse us, Marcia. I have an appointment."

"Don't let me keep you." Marcia smiled at Jean-Pierre. "It was very nice to meet you. I hope to see you again sometime."

Angel watched her walk away as though a mist were forming around her.

By the time Jean-Pierre got her home Angel was shaking as though she had a hard chill. He suggested hot tea, and Foster agreed to bring it to the library.

"Sit down, little one," Jean-Pierre said. "Why are you letting that silly woman upset you? Blake could not possibly prefer her to you."

"Oh, but he does. He always has. And to think I've felt sympathy for him for the long hours he keeps. No doubt he *must* be exhausted. He's probably been spending his evenings with her, then coming home to a wife he was obligated to get pregnant!"

"Angel! Stop it! You don't know what you're saying."

"I know exactly what I am saying. Blake never wanted to marry me. It was the only way he could hang onto the company. And he couldn't just marry me for my stock. He had to see that I produced a child."

Jean-Pierre stared at her. "But you love him."

"Oh, yes. I fell in love with him before I even returned to France. But he doesn't want my love. He would be embarrassed if he thought I'd been so foolish as to fall in love with him." Tears flowed unchecked down her cheeks as all the vitality drained from her.

Sobs began to shake her, and Jean-Pierre put his arms around her. "Hush, little one, you are only going to make yourself ill, carrying on this way."

But Angel no longer heard him. She was too wrapped up in the anguish of what she had learned about Blake and what she saw as her future. Her beloved father had

created more grief in her life than she could stand.

Jean-Pierre poured her a liberal amount of brandy. "Here, Angel, I want you to drink this," he said sternly and held it to her mouth until she finished it, shuddering as it went down.

"Why don't you lie down for a while?"

She shook her head, the tears still flowing. But Jean-Pierre scooped her into his arms and carried her into the foyer, just in time to meet Foster with the tea tray.

"Mrs. Carlyle is not feeling well. I'd like to put her to bed. Could you direct me to her room?"

Foster led the way upstairs. He set the tray by the bed and turned down the covers.

Jean-Pierre gently laid her on the bed.

"Should we contact Mr. Blake, sir?" Foster asked.

Jean-Pierre smiled sardonically. "At present, Blake is probably the last person Angel wants to see."

Foster nodded and left the room.

Eventually Jean-Pierre coaxed Angel into drinking some tea.

Jean-Pierre sat with Angel until she fell asleep; holding her hand so that she knew he was there.

AFTER HIS long luncheon with Jeremy, Blake was not in the mood to return to his office, but he made the effort and in a matter of hours delegated a considerable amount of work.

Glancing at his watch, he decided to go home and talk with Angel—attempt to explain how he felt, ask her to spend more time with him, let her know that he wanted to be included in every part of her life.

"I'll see you in the morning, Phyllis," he said, pausing by his secretary's desk.

She glanced up in surprise. "I've never known you to go home by four o'clock before."

"I've decided to cut back on some of the hours I put in around here."

"Good for you. Have a good evening."

Foster was carrying a tea tray down the stairs when Blake let himself in the front door.

"Mr. Blake. You're home early. Are you not feeling well?"

"Do I have to be sick to come home at a decent hour, Foster?" he asked irritably.

"Why, no, sir," Foster said, glancing up the staircase uncertainly.

Blake pulled off his tie and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt. Taking the steps two at a time, he went upstairs. When he reached the top of the staircase he heard a door closing and turned into the hallway, expecting to see Angel.

Instead, he watched with stunned disbelief as Jean-Pierre turned away from the bedroom door and faced him.

Blake stared at the man, absently noting his tired expression.

"What are you doing here?" Blake wasn't sure where the words came from.

"I've been taking care of your wife, since you obviously have other priorities," he said, and started down the stairs.

Blake whirled around. "Where's Angel?"

"In bed asleep. I would suggest you let her rest. She's had about all she can take today." In a few long strides, Jean-Pierre reached the front door and flung it open, slamming it behind him.

Never had Blake felt so much pain. Were the French so blasé about their affairs that they weren't even intimidated when the unsuspecting husband showed up early from work?

I've been taking care of your wife. My God! The man had his nerve. And what about Angel!

Blake opened the bedroom door. The drapes had been pulled and the room was shadowy. Silently he moved toward the bed. Angel was indeed asleep, her bright curls strewn across her pillow. Her face was in deeper shadow but she looked exhausted, and Blake withdrew, the pain deepening within him.

They must have spent the afternoon in bed together. What a fool he had been to think Angel was any different from her mother. Just because she was a virgin when he married her didn't mean she would not run to Jean-Pierre and pretend to be the poor neglected wife if the role suited her.

Blake found himself in the library.

I'm losing my mind, without a doubt, Blake decided with a deep groan. He found a bottle of Scotch, poured a glass and sat staring into the empty fireplace, contemplating the frailties of the human spirit.

If we go by the rules and play the game fairly, our lives are supposed to work out satisfactorily. Blake had operated his life on those principles, but now none of them made sense. All he knew was that his most secret dread had become a reality. He had lost Angel. Or rather, he had never had her to lose.

Blake knew nothing about love and loving. All he knew was the emotion was too painful to be borne.

FOSTER FOUND Blake asleep on the couch in the library later that night. He shook his head. An empty Scotch bottle lay on its side on the rug.

Something had certainly created an emotional storm in the Carlyle household. He hoped they would be strong enough to weather it.

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FOR THE NEXT several days the household appeared normal to any outside observer. Blake came home long after Angel had gone to bed at night and left before she got up, which took care of the necessity of conversation. Angel was too

heartsick to care. What, after all, was there to say?

From her continued sluggishness in the morning she had a hunch that she could very well be pregnant, and the doctor confirmed her suspicions the day of her preopening at the art gallery.

Blake, as usual, was late getting home. Angel had already eaten and was dressed, waiting for him, when he arrived.

She stood up when he walked into the room and Blake felt the now-familiar pain when he saw her. Angel wore a sheer black gown, Grecian in effect, with one shoulder bare. Her hair was in elaborate coils, and a less heavenly angel he'd never seen. She looked seductive, enticing, and he wanted her so badly he ached.

Since the day he had found Jean-Pierre at the house, Blake had refrained from making love to her. Every time he thought about it he saw her with Jean-Pierre instead, and a gut-wrenching pain shot through him. But he had grown accustomed to her loving nature and he missed her so much. He wondered if he would ever stop loving her.

"You look beautiful, Angel. I'll be the envy of every man there tonight," he said quietly.

She felt the color rise in her cheeks at his compliment.

"Thank you, Blake. I've been so nervous all day." She glanced at the clock. "Have you eaten?"

He shook his head. "I didn't want to take the time."

"I'll have Gina get your dinner while you change."

"But won't that make you late?"

"It doesn't matter. I don't even need to be there."

"You mean you aren't going to tell anyone who you are?"

"I didn't plan on it. Why?"

"I don't know. I just don't see the need for secrecy."

"There really isn't any now."

She looked at him quizzically. "If I were to acknowledge that I am the artist, I'm afraid Marcia might be embarrassed by her earlier remarks."

"I'll try to tell her myself before the general announcement. I'm sure she'll understand." He pulled his tie off. "I'll go up and change, then. Tell Gina I'll be down in fifteen minutes."

Angel pondered his unexpected remarks. He hadn't sounded concerned over Marcia's feelings. It was hard to tell with Blake, though.

Perhaps things would change when he knew that he was going to become a father. Perhaps Jean-Pierre had been right, and she had overreacted to Marcia's comments. Perhaps she had given up too soon. After all, Marcia had spent two years with him, Angel barely two months. It might take time to win him away from her, but he was worth fighting for.

THERE WAS A large gathering at the gallery when they arrived, and Mr. Huntington was wringing his

hands. "I was beginning to think you weren't even going to show up," he exclaimed.

"You don't need me now, Henry. My part of it is already accomplished." She tucked her arm tightly around Blake's. "By the way, Henry, this is my husband, Blake Carlyle."

Henry stuck out his hand. "Well, it's my pleasure to meet you at last, Mr. Carlyle. I don't mean to be rude, but I really would like to introduce Angel to some of the people here tonight, if you don't mind?"

"Not at all." Blake took Angel's hand and softly kissed the palm. "Why don't you accept the acclaim that is rightfully yours, darling? You deserve it."

Angel and Henry had no sooner walked away than Marcia appeared at Blake's shoulder. She wore a flattering golden gown.

"Hello, Blake. I wasn't sure if you would be here. Are you alone?" She glanced around the room.

"No, Angel is here. I'm glad to see you myself. There's something I've been meaning to tell you. Despite what your father might have found out, I married Angel because I love her. I did not mean to hurt you, but you must understand."

Marcia stared at him, stricken. "Oh, Blake. Then her affair with Jean-Pierre must be extremely painful for you."

Blake controlled the flinch he felt. "Whatever my feelings, they are private."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"There's another thing that Angel had intended to tell you the night you gave us the painting. You see, Angel is the artist AB. But she didn't want to embarrass you."

Marcia seemed to wilt. "And I gave you one of her paintings? She must have found that amusing."

"No, Marcia. Angel isn't like that. She was only concerned about your feelings."

"Thank you for telling me. If you don't mind, I don't believe I'll stay for the general announcement."

Blake stood in the crowd and watched Marcia leave the room. Then his attention was drawn to the front by the PA system.

THE REST OF the evening was a blur to Angel, and she didn't know what she would have done without Blake to run interference. She wasn't sure she was ready for the celebrity status her announcement had created.

Angel finally admitted her one desire was to escape, and Blake quickly eased her out of the throng. Once outside, they ran for the car like truant children.

At home, the shower felt heavily to her. She stood in the steady spray without moving, feeling the tight muscles in her neck and shoulders relax. Then the shower door opened and Blake stepped inside. "I thought you might need

some help scrubbing your back." He stroked the sudsy washcloth along her spine, rubbing gently.

When he finished, Blake turned her around so that she faced him. "Now it's your turn," he said.

Numbly, Angel took the cloth and began to rub it across his chest. She refused to meet his eyes. It was obvious that he hadn't decided to share her shower just to conserve water.

He chuckled when her hand hesitated at his abdomen and he turned around so she could scrub his back.

Blake turned to face her once more, rinsing the soap off his body. Then he turned off the water. After opening the shower door, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. "Blake, we're dripping water everywhere."

"Who cares?" he murmured, his mouth finding hers.

After a few moments, Angel managed to find her breath. "Not me."

It had been so long since he had made love to her, and she wanted him so much. She began kissing him—light, daring kisses—across his neck and chest. Her lips brushed against his nipples and she felt them contract at her touch.

They seemed to come together in an explosion of feeling. Blake held her so tightly she could scarcely breathe, and his urgent kisses turned her into a flame. She loved him aggressively for the first time, initiating touches and kisses,

showing him that he had taught her well. When he possessed her she thought she would faint with the joy of it and she responded to him with every atom of her being.

Eventually they fell asleep, exhausted, but later Angel was awakened—again and again—with Blake stroking her, kissing her everywhere, worshiping her with his body.

She tried to respond in a similar fashion but often was carried away with what he was doing to her. He taught her not to be afraid to show her response to him. And he taught her, finally and irrevocably, that there would never be another man for her.

ANGEL WOKE UP the next morning feeling that all was right with her world. She had disclosed her identity to the art world, and nothing dire had happened. She had also made up her mind to fight for her marriage.

Blake had not left early that morning, and now he pulled her onto his chest and began to kiss her—slow, lazy kisses that caused her muscles and bones to turn into soft wax. She lost track of time. It no longer mattered. Blake was there with her, loving her, and her world was a perfect place.

Sometime later, as they lay in a tangle of sheets, their bodies covered with a glistening sheen of perspiration, Angel decided that it was time to share her happy news.

"Blake?" she murmured.

"Hmm?" He sounded almost asleep.

"I have some news for you."

They still lay together, their legs entwined, with her head resting on his chest. He opened his eyes lazily and stared down at her bright blue ones.

"So tell me."

"I'm pregnant," she said, with a mischievous grin.

Blake sat up as though recoiling from her.

"You're what?"

She watched him in amazement, bewildered by the instant change from the relaxed, well-loved male she had so recently enjoyed into a hard-faced, cold and aloof stranger.

With her words, Blake was dumped out of his warm, sensuous haze into the cold reality of morning. *Jean-Pierre!* She had never admitted her affair with the Frenchman. Instead, she was going to allow Blake to think the baby was unquestionably his.

"I thought you'd be happy."

Blake sat up on the side of the bed, running his hands through his hair. "Why?" he finally answered.

He rose and strode into the bathroom, turning on the shower full force.

Angel continued to sit on the bed, stunned at the sudden change in his mood. When she finally forced herself to walk into the bathroom, Blake was stepping out of the shower.

Turning it back on, Angel quickly soaped down and rinsed, then got out. She patted herself dry with a towel and pulled on her robe.

Blake was shaving, and she sat down on the vanity stool.

"I seem to be missing something," she said. "Wasn't the purpose of this marriage to produce a child?"

"It certainly was." Blake switched off his electric razor and turned to her. "It's really unfortunate that neither Jean-Pierre nor I will ever know for sure which one of us has become a proud father!"

A sudden surge of nausea and dizziness swept over Angel as Blake walked out of the room. She barely had the strength to close and lock the door before she was violently ill.

Vaguely she heard a tap on the door and Blake's voice. "Angel, are you all right?"

Blake found her lying on the floor when he got the door open. It had taken him forever to find the damned key.

She had not moved, and it scared him. He wished he knew who her doctor was. He didn't even know how far along she was. They had barely been married six weeks.

So if she is at least six weeks pregnant, there wouldn't be any doubt the baby is yours. You know she hadn't been with another man before you married her.

Blake wondered how soon a woman could tell she was preg-

nant. He knew so little about those things. Gently he laid her on the bed and pulled the covers up. Then he went in search of Foster.

ANGEL LAY where he'd placed her a short time ago, but now her eyes were open. They looked bruised, with dark circles beneath them.

Blake walked over to the bed. "How do you feel?"

She moved her head restlessly. "I'm all right."

"I'm sure you are, but I think we should call the doctor just the same. Who did you go see?"

"Dr. Friedrichs. But don't call him. He said I might have a few disagreeable symptoms."

"Foster is bringing you some tea and toast. Maybe that will help."

She nodded.

"Do you want me to stay with you?"

She shook her head quickly and closed her eyes, but not before large tears slipped down her cheeks.

"Don't cry, Angel, please." He took her hand but it went rigid at his touch. "Look, we'll work something out between us. You just get to feeling better. We'll sit down tonight and talk about the situation. I'll be home early."

He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. She flinched.

"Please don't cry."

She lay there quietly listening, waiting for his footsteps to reassure her that he had left the room, hoping that she never had to see him again.

When she had opened her eyes and recalled his reaction to her news, all the queasiness returned to her stomach. Did he honestly believe that she had been to bed with Jean-Pierre, or was that his way of justifying to himself his behavior with Marcia? She would probably never know. It no longer mattered.

Hours later Angel was comfortably ensconced in the first-class section of a jumbo jet on her way to France.

She had called Jean-Pierre and explained to him that she was returning to Paris but had not told him why. He didn't need to know of Blake's ridiculous accusations and she was afraid it might affect their friendship.

Angel hadn't bothered packing more than a small carry-on case. Clothes were the least of her concerns at the moment. She would be needing a whole new wardrobe, anyway. According to Dr. Friedrichs, she must have gotten pregnant on her wedding night! The baby's birth should be sometime in late January.

The last thing Angel had done before she left was to leave a note for Blake. She didn't feel that she could ever see him again without reexperiencing that moment of pain when he had accused her of not being sure who had fathered her baby.

BLAKE ARRIVED at home at five, eager to see Angel. He had called at lunchtime and Foster had in-

formed him she was resting. He was glad.

He had started up the stairs when Foster appeared in the foyer. "Is Angel still upstairs?"

"No, sir. She isn't here. She said to tell you she left you a message on the desk in the library."

A cold hand clutched at his heart and Blake shivered. The one constant in his plans was that Angel would be there to talk to him.

Flipping on the desk lamp, Blake reached for the envelope and pulled out the note with sudden dread.

Dear Blake,

By the time you read this I will be on my way home to France. I believe the original agreement between us has now been fulfilled. According to the doctor, the baby is due in late January. I will let you know when the baby arrives so that the legal papers can be prepared, but for all practical purposes you now have control of the company.

I hope that you and Marcia will be able to continue your relationship unhampered now. I will sign any papers you wish in order to terminate the marriage at the proper time.

Wishing you the best in the future.

Angel

Blake stared numbly at the note. If the baby was due in January,

then it had to be his. What was she talking about? Marcia wasn't a part of his life. Angel would know that better than anyone. He had scarcely had time to spend with her, let alone anyone else.

She hadn't mentioned a word about Jean-Pierre. Had he gone home with her? Did it matter? Angel wanted her freedom from him. He hadn't needed to sit down and talk with her.

Perhaps it was better this way. Blake recognized he wasn't husband material. He didn't share his feelings enough or let down his guard with people. He had begun to relax with Angel but it hadn't been enough. It would have been different if she had married him out of love, rather than a sense of obligation.

He wondered how his dad and Scott had ever hoped that he and Angel would be able to have a working relationship together. She deserved so much more than he could give her.

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BY AUTUMN Angel was absorbed into her circle of friends and often felt that she had imagined her time in San Francisco. Only the growing evidence of the child she carried reminded her that she and Blake were to become parents.

She hadn't heard from Blake since she left, but then she hadn't expected him to respond to her letter. What was there for him to say?

Jean-Pierre had returned to France with commissions for sev-

eral sculptures and an agreement with Henry Huntington for a show in another year or two. Perhaps influenced by that encouragement, Jean-Pierre had asked Michelle to marry him, which simply meant that she stayed with him all the time, rather than most of the time.

It also meant that Suzanne and Angel needed another roommate. But when they talked about it, Angel admitted that she would probably not stay there after the baby was born.

Jean-Pierre, Michelle and Suzanne listened to Angel's plans with varying degrees of dismay. She sounded so serene, as though it was perfectly normal to be preparing to raise the child on her own.

Angel was not eating enough. As the baby grew she became thinner in other areas. Jean-Pierre continued to nag her about eating and insisted on accompanying her on her next visit to the doctor.

BLAKE WAS HAVING an unusually hectic day on the Tuesday after the holidays. When the phone rang at his elbow, he pushed the intercom button. "Yes, Phyllis?"

"You have a transatlantic call, Blake. A Mr. Jean-Pierre Armand."

He forced himself to reach for the phone. "Yes, Jean-Pierre? What do you want?"

"I just wondered if you were the cold-blooded bastard I thought, or

whether you might want to know how Angel is doing."

"Is she all right?"

"At least you gave the correct response. But I called to inform you that there's a very good chance she won't survive giving birth to your child. Just thought you'd want to know."

Blake felt light-headed. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that Angel hasn't been taking proper care of herself. She hasn't gained enough weight, and the doctor thinks the baby is going to be large. She told me that since the only thing you ever wanted from her was that baby, she would give it to you, even if she died trying. The point is, she very well may."

"Oh, my God." Blake stared at the wall in disbelief. "Would she see me if I came over there?"

"That depends on whether you bring your precious Marcia with you."

"Jean-Pierre, I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't had anything to do with Marcia Sinclair since Angel and I announced our engagement."

"Then why did she imply that the two of you were merely biding your time, waiting for Angel to return to France?"

"When in the world did she say that?"

"The day I had to take Angel home because she was hysterical to find out that you had been spending your evenings with Marcia, letting Angel think you were

working. Why else did you think I was upstairs with her, trying to calm her down?"

Blake heard his own voice as though at a distance. "I thought you were having an affair with Angel."

"You what? Why, you stupid bastard. Even if I ever thought of Angel in that way, which I haven't, she fell for you so hard she could scarcely wait to return to San Francisco and marry you."

Blake latched on to his words. "Angel loves me?"

"Of course she loves you. Why else do you suppose she's risking her life to have your baby?"

Blake felt as though he was in the middle of a nightmare. Nothing made sense. Angel loved him? She had loved him when they married? She had loved him and had left him?

"I can't believe this."

"Believe it."

ANGEL GAVE UP all pretense of trying to paint. Her back had been hurting her since morning. The doctor said she still had four weeks to go, but she wondered if her baby had checked the calendar lately.

She tried sitting, lying and walking, but nothing seemed to help. Angel wondered if she should call the doctor.

There was a tap on the door and she turned, glad to have some company. "Come in."

The door opened and Jean-Pierre walked in. "I've brought someone to see you," he said.

"Blake!" Angel felt her knees begin to shake as she edged over to a chair and sank down into it. He looked tired, but other than that he looked marvelous to her.

"Hello, Angel." He came over and knelt down on one knee before her. Brushing back wisps of hair from her face, he studied her carefully. She looked pale, but that was in part her normal complexion. Her face and arms looked thinner and the tentlike top she wore did little to camouflage her tummy. He pulled her into his arms gently, and they stayed that way, neither noticing that Jean-Pierre had left the room.

"Oh, Angel, will you ever forgive me for allowing you to leave?"

"As I recall," she said shakily, "you didn't have much choice."

"But I could have been on the next flight."

"Why would you have done that?"

"Because I love you so much, and it has been agony for me to be away from you."

"You love me?" she repeated faintly.

"Darling, there's so much to explain. Do you suppose we could find somewhere a little more comfortable to have this discussion?"

Pulling herself up from the chair, she led him over to a long sofa.

"Please understand that if I ever get down, I may never get up again," she said with a slight smile.

Blake pulled her comfortably back into his arms. He never wanted her more than a few inches away from him again.

"I owe you so many apologies I don't know where to start. I've made such a mess of things from the very beginning. I didn't even recognize that I loved you when we got married. And I found out that Marcia made some remarks that upset you. I realize now that nothing she could have said would have bothered you if I'd had the guts to tell you how I felt, but I didn't know how to put my feelings into words. I still don't."

"You seem to be doing an excellent job. Don't quit now."

"I'm sorry I ever thought there was something between you and Jean-Pierre, but when I found him coming out of our bedroom that day, I'm afraid I jumped to the wrong conclusion."

"If I'd only known you thought there was something going on between Jean-Pierre and me. I was so shocked when you accused me of not knowing who had fathered my baby."

Blake groaned. "I can't believe how stupid I've been, my love."

"I like the sound of that. 'My love.' I had so much hoped that someday you would love me."

"I've never stopped." He kissed her, his hand resting on her protruding stomach. He felt a tenseness under his hand that pulled, then slowly let go. He raised his head. "What was that?"

"I'm not sure, but I have a feeling that this baby of ours is getting ready to be born soon."

"But it can't. You have at least another month to go."

"Fine. Why don't you explain that to your offspring while I call the doctor?" She went to the phone.

"But, Angel, Jean-Pierre says you're too small to have a baby. That it's dangerous for you."

She picked up the phone and dialed. Without looking around she said, "Jean-Pierre has a big mouth."

"Thank God. If he hadn't called to tell me, I'd still be sitting in San Francisco."

She began to speak into the phone, and when she finally hung up, she sighed.

"They want me to meet the doctor at the hospital. He wants to check me."

"How do we get there?" He began pacing.

"It's too early to pace, Blake, but if you want to get some practice, go right ahead. Meanwhile, I'll see if Jean-Pierre or Michelle is home."

Within minutes her friends arrived and whisked Angel off to the hospital. The doctor agreed that, regardless of their calculations, the baby was on its way.

Blake panicked. He took the doctor aside and explained that he was Angel's husband and that nothing was to stop the doctor from saving her.

"I have every intention of saving them both, *monsieur*," the doctor told him. "Because of its early arrival, the baby will be less of a threat to Angel. Just try to stay calm, if that is possible."

It was almost three o'clock in the morning before the doctor reappeared. "You have a beautiful daughter, Monsieur Carlyle. She is barely five pounds but quite healthy, with an excellent set of lungs. Also fuzzy red hair and a ferocious frown. Hopefully she will grow to like her new world shortly."

Blake stood up. "When may I see Angel?"

"In a few moments."

"Was it bad for her?"

"Not as much as I had feared. She was much more relaxed and happy than I have seen her in months. I'm sure it helped that you were with her."

Jean-Pierre walked over and stuck out his hand. "Congratulations; Blake. I couldn't be happier for you."

"Thanks. I want you to know how much I appreciate all you've done, Jean-Pierre."

"I did it for Angel, Blake. I'm just pleased that everything has worked out so well. I might even grow to like you."

"Same here."

The men grinned at each other.

A nurse appeared in the doorway. "You may see Madame Carlyle now, if you wish."

Blake followed her down the hallway to a small private room. Angel was in bed, her eyes closed.

He walked over to the bed and took her hand. It was warm and he gripped it, sudden tears flooding his eyes. He loved her so much. What would he have done if he had lost her?

Her eyes flicked open. "Have you seen her?"

"Not yet."

"She looks just like you in a temper," she whispered.

"But she has your hair."

"Oh, yes. My hair and your temper, what a lethal combination!" Angel saw the trace of tears on his cheeks. "What's wrong, my love?"

"Nothing. Everything is perfect. As soon as you can travel, I'd like to take you home with me."

"I'd like that. Blake?"

"Yes, love?"

"Since our daughter is obviously going to be the chairman of the board, don't you think we should consider producing a president?"

He smiled. "We could certainly give it some thought."

"Then, of course," she mused, "we'll need officers and a board of directors and—"

"I love you, Angel."

She smiled—a warm, loving glow that radiated throughout the room. "You certainly have a way with words, Blake."



**Solution to
CROSSWORD #28
Vol. 5 No. 4**

SETS	SHAD	COB
PART	TALE	HUE
USER	ADAM	ATE
RETURN	SORT	
	TIDE	NOTES
RIM	FANS	BELL
IRA	TRUCE	RIO
DOTS	DRAW	SAT
ENTER	ETES	
	REAR	TRADED
SHE	CANE	LODE
HIS	EVER	EVEN
YES	SEWS	SENT



BETSY PAGE

The Arrangement



She told herself to think of her relationship with Tyler Langston strictly as a business agreement.

But sharing the man's bed added a very unbusinesslike flavor to the arrangement....

“**Y**ou can’t be serious!” Tyler Langston was incredulous. Lines of stress created by the running of Langston Industries gave character to a face that was ruggedly handsome. Agitated strides carried him back and forth across the room. “Arranged marriages are archaic.” Tyler came to a halt in front of a carved oak desk. Leaning his palms flat on the surface, Tyler faced his father and said tersely, “I will find a wife in my own good time.”

“You’ve gone through a string of mistresses, not one of whom would make a decent wife.” Uriah Langston shook his head.

The incredulity etched into Tyler’s features deepened. “You honestly want me to marry a woman you met in the mountains of Maine on one of your fishing expeditions?”

Uriah leaned forward to bring his face to within inches of Tyler’s. “If you want sole control of this company, you will do as I ask.”

Tyler scowled. “And if I don’t?”

“Then I will divide my voting shares between you and your brother and sister. You have shares of your own that would still leave you in control—” Uriah paused to give emphasis to his next words

“—unless they decide to vote together against you.”

“They’d run this business into bankruptcy within a year!”

“If you don’t marry and produce heirs, they or their offspring will eventually inherit control anyway,” Uriah pointed out matter-of-factly.

Straightening, Tyler viewed his father narrowly. “Then I will find my own wife.”

Uriah’s expression hardened. “You will marry Kate.”

Tyler stood rigidly, staring at his father. “Kate Riley is an auto mechanic working a two-pump garage in a one-horse town. Socially she would be completely out of place here.”

Uriah frowned. “The woman is more widely read than most of my friends.”

Tyler’s eyes darkened. “You were stuck in Piperville for four days waiting for parts to arrive for your car. Anyone who could speak in complete sentences would have seemed cultured.”

“I chose to be stuck in Piperville *after* I met Mrs. Riley.” Uriah regarded his son levelly. “I could have had those parts delivered within a day if I’d wished it.”

“And that’s another thing,” Tyler went on. “Mrs. Riley was

married at sixteen to a man twice her age."

"And widowed when she was twenty-two," his father finished. "I would venture to say that marriage is still an honorable institution. Don't try to tell me that those females you have spent time with didn't have their first rolls in the hay at an early age."

Tyler sucked in an angry breath. "If you are so smitten with this woman, why don't you marry her yourself!"

Uriah shook his head sadly. "I'm too old. Kate needs someone with youth and energy to handle her." Uriah looked his son hard in the face. "She's a perfect match for you."

Massaging the back of his neck, Tyler paced across the room. He had never seen his father so adamant. Finally stopping in front of Uriah's chair, he said curtly, "Six months!"

"What?" Uriah frowned.

"I will agree to a six-month trial marriage," Tyler conceded through clenched teeth.

Uriah rejected the concession. "Six months is not a trial—it's a fling," he said. "If you must have a limit, then we'll make it five years."

"One year," Tyler growled.

"Four."

Tyler ground his teeth. "We'll use Claire's first marriage as a precedent. Two years, and that is my limit!"

"Using your sister to set any precedent makes my skin crawl."

Uriah frowned. "However, I will agree."

KATE FRANKLIN Riley leaned under the hood of Sam Krammer's old Dodge. It had been one of those days. Tomorrow was the beginning of the Fourth of July weekend, and she had had three times as many gas customers as usual, as well as people wanting car tune-ups before starting out on long trips. With three other people besides herself to support, she always needed the money, she thought tiredly.

The ringing of the bell, indicating that someone had pulled up at the gas pumps, brought an under-the-breath curse. She wiped the excess grease from her hands onto her coveralls and walked outside.

The early-summer sun was slowly setting over the mountains to the west. But Kate didn't notice the colorful sky as her eyes fell on her customer. Climbing out of the silver-gray Porsche parked beside her pumps, he looked as out of place in this small Maine town as his car. The agitation on his face gave sharp definition to his angular features, heightening the squareness of his jaw. He was probably lost, she thought.

His scowl deepened as she reached him. "You don't carry the highest grade."

"I carry what my usual customers buy. I doubt if one tankful of the regular unleaded will ruin your car."

Tyler Langston studied the woman in front of him, from her short-cropped black hair to the curious gray-black eyes that regarded him with evident irritation, and down the five-foot, five-inch frame clothed in ill-fitting coveralls. Damn his father, he cursed silently. Aloud he said, "I suppose you're right. Fill it up."

There was an arrogance in the way he was looking at her, as if she were an insect he'd like to crush. But business was money and, unscrewing the cap of the gas tank, she inserted the nozzle.

"Where's Toby?" he asked, already knowing the answer but wondering what she would say.

"What?" Frowning, Kate glanced toward him.

"The sign says Toby's Garage." Tyler indicated the large letters over the entrance with a nod of his head.

"Toby was my husband. He left this place to me when he died, and I chose to keep the name the same," Kate replied cuttingly, "because there are a lot of tourists passing through who wouldn't consider allowing a woman to touch their cars. Besides, the townspeople would have kept on calling it Toby's Garage no matter what I renamed it." She screwed the cap back on the gas tank. "That'll be twenty dollars."

Pulling out a leather wallet, the man extracted a twenty-dollar bill and handed it to her.

With a muttered thank-you, she stalked into the garage and put the money in the till.

As the man drove away, she found herself glancing at her image in the mirror beside the Coke machine. There were grease smears on her face and neck, and her hair, which had begun the day in soft waves, was now a tangled mass of uncoordinated curls. Her clothes reeked of oil and gasoline and her hands looked as if they hadn't been washed in years. Then her back stiffened. No one had the right to look down on her as if she were less than human. She ran a legitimate business that kept her and her mother and brother and sister clothed, fed and with a roof over their heads. Admittedly her mother did rent a room to tourists looking for a quiet, out-of-the-way place to stay during the summer season, but that brought in only a small amount. It was Kate who carried the major burden of support.

Forcefully shaking off the sudden depressing effect the offensive customer had on her, she returned to Sam's car.

She was exhausted as she drove home, and turning onto the street on which the old two-story, wood-framed house where she lived with her mother and brother and sister stood, she wondered if she was having an exhaustion-produced nightmare. On the street in front of the house sat the silver-gray Porsche.

Her mother met her at the door. A fragile-looking woman, she had blue eyes that almost continually held an edge of panic. "Go shower." A sparkle entered Harriet Franklin's eyes. "I have a guest I want you to meet. It's Tyler Langston, Uriah Langston's son," her mother said, her face bright with excitement.

Uriah Langston had left both Kate and her mother large tips for fixing his car and boarding him during his stay in their town, and Kate could almost see the dollar signs in her mother's eyes. But the thought of spending any time under the same roof with the man who drove the silver-gray Porsche made Kate's blood run cold. "I have more important things to do with my time." Feeling a sudden prickling sensation, her gaze traveled past her mother to the entrance to the living room to discover the object of their conversation watching them. Tilting her chin defiantly, she headed up the stairs.

A knock sounded on the bathroom door as she stripped and started to climb into the tub.

"Mom sent me up to get your clothes before they stink up the bathroom," Robin, the female half of the nine-year-old set of twins who were her brother and sister, said through the door.

Kate shoved the clothing out the door, then proceeded to take a shower.

She turned off the water and towed herself dry. Pulling on a

short terry cloth robe, she was about to leave the bathroom when her eyes fell on an expensive, tooled-leather shaving kit. It was open, and picking it up, she noticed a small silver plaque discreetly attached to the inside. The inscription read: "Feel free to leave your shaving kit in my bathroom anytime. Love, Linda."

With a grimace of distaste, Kate zipped it shut and carried it out of the bathroom. Knocking on the door of the room directly across from her own, she waited for an answer. There was none.

She frowned at the shaving kit, and then, with a mental shrug, opened the door. Crossing to the bed, she placed the kit on the night table.

Suddenly footsteps sounded in the hall, and she turned back toward the door just as Tyler Langston's muscular bulk blocked the exit. "Looking for me?"

"I was returning your shaving kit," she said tightly, the brown eyes traveling over her robe-clad body making her feel uneasy and defensive.

He continued to regard her darkly. Without the grease smears, the woman's unusually large gray eyes dominated a face that Tyler judged more cute than pretty. The nose was small and the lips were full. It was just the sort of face that would appeal to the protective instincts of an older man like his father, he mused cynically.

Her back stiffened. "Now, if you will excuse me, I'll be on my way."

But he continued to block the doorway. "Do you make a habit of wandering into the room of a male guest wearing nothing more than a bathrobe?"

The way he spoke made her sound cheap, and her eyes flashed fire. "I was merely trying to be helpful. In your case, I will stifle the impulse in the future."

She was forced to brush against him to make good her escape, and the unwelcome contact produced a strong sense of unease she could not shake as she entered her own room and dried her hair.

Her stomach began to growl, and pulling on a fresh pair of jeans and a T-shirt, she went downstairs.

Harriet turned away from the sink. "If you're hungry, I'll fix you something."

"I can forage for myself," Kate said, refusing the offer. "But I want Mr. Langston out of this house. I just don't trust the man. He makes me uncomfortable."

Her mother breathed a sigh. "Speaking of men, Joe Nieley came by today. He said that you turned down his invitation to the Fourth of July Picnic."

"I'm not certain if I even want to go," Kate muttered, wishing there was a way to escape what was coming next and knowing there wasn't.

"I admit that Joe is quite a bit older than you, but so was Toby.

He owns the bank and a lot of land in these parts. You could do a lot worse. You're twenty-seven years old now and you aren't going to get many more chances." Her mother's voice took on a coaxing tone. "I don't understand why you won't marry him. You wouldn't have to work in that smelly garage any longer, and I wouldn't have to take in boarders who make you feel uneasy."

"We're doing just fine as we are," Kate said tersely, passing her mother and opening the refrigerator. "Besides . . ." The rest of what she was going to say died in her throat as she saw Tyler Langston standing in the doorway.

Following her daughter's line of vision, Harriet Franklin turned. Seeing her boarder, she smiled politely. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Returning her smile with one that didn't quite reach his eyes, he said, "I wanted to apologize to your daughter. I'm afraid I may have said a few things she took the wrong way."

With an exasperated grimace at Kate, Harriet returned her attention to Tyler. "She does have a habit of taking things the wrong way. Now if you will excuse me, I think I'll retire."

Turning back to the refrigerator as her mother left the room, Kate uncovered a plate of fried chicken and took out a thigh. Then she poured herself a glass of milk and carried her late evening snack to

the table. She could feel Tyler's eyes following her.

Glancing up, she met his shuttered gaze. "Apology accepted. Now will you please leave me alone."

Ignoring her request, he continued to study her coolly. "Even in this enlightened age there are relatively few female mechanics. How did you happen to choose that profession?"

"It was my husband's trade and he taught it to me," she answered tightly. Then she frowned. "Why did you ask me about Toby? You obviously knew who I was when you stopped for gas."

"The truth is that my father told me very little about your personal life," he replied nonchalantly. He wasn't lying. It had been a detective who had supplied him with what details he had, and those were sketchy. In carefully schooled conversational tones he asked, "How long have you had the responsibility for your mother and brother and sister on your shoulders?"

The lines of tiredness on Kate's face deepened. "My father died when I was nineteen. Toby and I helped my mother financially, and when Toby died, I sold our home and moved back in here. It was cheaper than supporting two households."

"Why don't you marry Joe Nieley like your mother wants you to?"

Shocked by his forwardness, her eyes narrowed as she again met his

steady gaze. "Because I don't want to. I can take care of my family just fine on my own."

"Your mother seems to feel otherwise."

Her jaw tightened. "My mother grew up believing that a woman has to have a man to look after her no matter what the price."

A hint of cynicism entered Tyler's eyes. "You must have agreed with her at one time. You did marry when you were sixteen."

Kate's hands closed around the glass of milk. "I had my reasons, but they're none of your business." Rising abruptly from the table, she drank the milk. She placed the glass on the counter and moved toward the door. "If you're ready to go upstairs, I'll follow and turn off the lights. I've had a long day and I'm beat."

"It's been a long day for me, too," Tyler said, rising from his chair and moving past her out the door.

As she followed him up the stairs, Kate thought about how confidently she had declared she could take care of her family. But the reality of the situation was that things were not going well. Business had been slow during the past winter, and both her mother and the twins had been ill, running up large medical bills.

But the thought of marrying Joe Nieley made her blood run cold. She couldn't do that to herself—nor to Toby. Climbing into bed a while later, she vowed she would

find another way to keep her family solvent.

AS USUAL, at a little before six the next morning, Kate was dressed for work and fixing herself some breakfast.

"I'll make my own eggs when you're finished," Tyler Langston said from the doorway.

Startled by his early-morning appearance, Kate frowned. "You're up early."

Crossing the room, he leaned against the wall, his expression shuttered as he watched her turn the eggs. "I'm used to starting my day early."

"It's no trouble to cook two more eggs," she said stiffly, finding his proximity unnerving. "How do you want them?"

"Over easy," he answered, following her with his eyes as she crossed to the refrigerator.

"You want toast, too?" John, the other twin, offered.

"Sure," Tyler replied, his gaze never leaving Kate.

John seemed perfectly comfortable in the man's company. "I'm going to help Kate at the garage today," he announced proudly between bites of egg and toast.

"I used to go into work with my father when I was your age," Tyler said approvingly.

"My dad's dead." John took a swallow of orange juice, then looked at the man across from him and added solemnly, "When he found out that he was going to be the father of twins, he went out to

celebrate and got his neck broke in a fight at the tavern."

Kate felt a flush creeping from her neck onto her face. A few years before, John had begun asking questions about how his father had died. Their neighbor, one of the town's busiest busybodies, had been happy to fill him in on the sordid details of his father's drinking and brawling. To ease the picture, Harriet had added the celebration aspect, and the matter-of-fact statement he'd made to Tyler was the version John had developed to satisfy himself.

In Tyler Langston's estimation, Kate guessed, her family had just sunk a notch lower. She lifted her head, pride glittering in her eyes. She glanced toward her brother. "Are you about ready to leave?"

The boy was out of his chair in a flash.

Kate followed her brother outside, glad to be away from the man's scrutiny.

The morning went reasonably well. John washed car windshields and pumped gas so that Kate only had to stop working in the garage to handle the cash register.

She had just slammed down the hood of the trunk she'd been working on when a familiar voice sounded from the entrance.

"You could get arrested for using child labor." It was as close to a joke as Joe Nieley ever came. Turning, Kate watched him make his way toward her, being careful not to get his three-piece suit dirtied. He was forty-four, and his

once-lean frame was beginning to take on a slightly rounded appearance.

"John insisted on helping," she said, attempting to smile but failing.

"If you'd give up this crusade to prove you can take care of yourself and your family on your own and marry me, you wouldn't have to spend your days working in this filthy garage." Disgust etched itself into his features as he looked around. "Toby Riley certainly fell short of providing for his widow."

"He did the best he could," Kate snapped. Then, because Joe was a powerful man, she forced a politeness into her voice. "I do appreciate your offer, but I'm not interested in remarrying."

Joe's thin veneer of civility fell away, exposing the anger beneath. He closed the distance between himself and Kate, capturing her by the upper arms, glaring down into her face. "Toby Riley's memory won't keep your family fed or a roof over their heads."

"Let go of me," she said, attempting to twist free from his grasp.

"You should do as the lady asks," came a hard voice from the doorway. It was Tyler Langston's.

Joe glanced over his shoulder and his expression blackened further. Releasing her abruptly, he walked out of the garage as if he was in total control of the situation.

Kate schooled her features into a mask of indifference and turned

to Tyler. "What are you doing here?"

"Your mother was going to bring you and John some lunch," he answered. "I was coming this way anyway, so I volunteered to save her the trip."

"You really made Mr. Nieley mad this time, sis," John said, coming up behind Tyler.

Tyler set the basket he was carrying on the counter. "I suppose my father met Mr. Nieley when he was in town."

"Yeah," John responded when his sister remained silent. "He's always hanging around Kate."

"Go wash your hands so you can eat lunch," Kate ordered, interrupting any further comments John might have been thinking of making. She waited until the boy was gone, then demanded icily, "Why are you here, Mr. Langston?"

"To bring you your lunch," he replied dryly.

"Don't be obtuse!" she said, glaring. "I want to know why you are in this town."

His level gaze revealed nothing of what was going on in his mind. "My father said your mother had a pleasant room to rent and was a good cook, and I felt that I needed a vacation." Then before she could express her doubts about the validity of this statement, he added, "Enjoy your lunch," and left.

"JOHN TELLS ME you quarreled with Joe today," Harriet said in disapproval as she joined her

daughter on the porch that evening.

Kate was curled up on the porch swing, seeking the quiet solitude of the night. "I didn't quarrel with him. I merely refused his offer of marriage," she replied in an uncompromising voice.

Harriet's disapproving look deepened. "I realize you have a great load on your shoulders, but Joe has always been very kind to me and he loves you."

"He doesn't love me," Kate stated flatly.

"I don't know how you can say that," her mother admonished. "He has courted you for the past five years, ever since Toby's death."

"Mom, please." Kate rewarded her mother with a cold stare, and with a discouraged shake of her head, Harriet went back inside.

Alone again, Kate stared unseeing at the crescent moon surrounded by thousands of stars. The look on Joe's face and the actual mention of Toby's name earlier that day told her that his patience had come to an end. Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes.

"Mind if I join you?" Tyler Langston's voice broke the peaceful stillness.

"Yes," she answered coldly.

"Your mother seems to think that marrying Joe Nieley is the solution to your problems."

Her jaw tightened. "My mother doesn't have all the facts."

"Such as how much he disliked your former husband?"

Kate's gaze swung to the man, her eyes dark. "Do you always eavesdrop on people's conversations?"

The hint of a cynical smile curled his lips. "It looked more like the beginning of a brawl to me."

With a stay-out-of-my-business glare, Kate rose from the swing and started toward the door.

But before she could make good her escape, Tyler blocked her way. Catching her by the arm, he pulled her into a darkened corner of the porch and pinned her against the house with his body.

"Your mother tells me you haven't dated anyone since your husband's death," Tyler said in low tones. "Are you really that immune to men?"

As he spoke, his hands moved leisurely along her sides, pausing momentarily to allow his thumbs to test the curve of her breasts, then continuing downward to her hips. She drew a hard, sharp breath as the heat of his touch sparked a fire in her of startling intensity.

She opened her mouth to protest, but his lips found hers and accepted their parted position as an invitation. The hard thighs pressed against her sent the blood surging hot and wild through her veins.

He raised his head to look into her eyes, heavy-lidded now with desire. "No, you are not immune," he said softly.

Kate twisted free and fled into the house. In her room, she discovered she was shaking. She didn't even like Tyler Langston, but he had brought her body to life as if it had been merely waiting for his touch.

*

THE FOURTH of July Picnic was the biggest social event of the year in Piperville. Tyler had finished his breakfast and was listening to the twins describe in detail the events of the day.

"There are races in the afternoon," John was explaining enthusiastically. "Robin and I have been practicing the three-legged sack race ever since school was out."

Robin picked up the narrative. "And for the picnic the unmarried women will have lunch baskets on a long table and Mr. Jacobs will auction them off to the unmarried men. Mr. Nieley would be doing the auctioning because he's the mayor, but he's divorced so that makes him one of the bachelors." Robin grimaced. "He'll probably bid on Kate's basket."

"I'm not taking a basket," Kate stated as she opened the refrigerator and took out the orange juice.

"Yes, you are," Robin corrected. "Mom has already packed it."

Pausing in the act of pouring herself a glass of juice, Kate turned toward her mother. "I told you I had no intention of participating in

the basket auction, and I meant it."

Kate glared at her mother while Harriet remained steadfast in her determination that her daughter take a lunch.

Embarrassed by the family dispute in front of Tyler, Kate drank her orange juice in a terse silence. Then she went out and sat down on the porch swing. Tyler joined her on the porch, leaning against one of the pillars supporting the roof. "I tried to help. I suggested it might be unfair for you to take a basket of food that your mother had prepared. It might give the unsuspecting male who bought it the impression you could cook."

Kate met his cynical grin with one of her own. "I'll bet she loved hearing that."

The brown eyes twinkled. "You notice I have joined you on the porch."

"And I thought you only came out here to annoy me," she tossed back acidly.

"Annoyance wasn't what I saw in your eyes last night," he countered in low, mellow tones.

Harriet broke the silence that had descended over the porch as she came though the doorway with a large basket on each arm.

"Let me help you." Tyler was immediately at Harriet's side, taking the baskets from her.

"Kate is a perfectly good cook," Harriet said haughtily, as she and Tyler descended the steps and started down the sidewalk. "She just doesn't have time these days."

"I'm certain she's a wonderful cook," he said, smiling down at her warmly, his tone apologetic. "How could she not be with you for a teacher?"

Harriet rewarded him with a forgiving smile. Kate promised herself for the umpteenth time that she would never be as gullible as her mother when men were concerned.

By the time they arrived, the park in the center of Piperville was already swarming with people.

Booths had been set up where, for a quarter, children and adults alike could test their skill at knocking down bowling pins with a softball, tossing rings around the tops of soda bottles, throwing darts at balloons or dunking one of the locals by hitting a bull's-eye at the end of a pole that held a chair above a tank of water.

Kate, grabbing each of the twins by the hand, tossed Tyler a haughty glare and led the children toward the booths.

After a couple of futile tries to win a small stuffed animal, Kate found herself being dragged along with her mother and Tyler to the basket auction.

Turning, Kate saw Joe Nieley approaching. "I would have come looking for you sooner," he said, his gaze shifting from Kate to Tyler, then back to Kate. "But I was selling chances on the water dunk."

Harriet smiled. "Joe, this is Tyler Langston. He's boarding with us for a few days. His father is

Uriah Langston. I believe you met him when he was here a few weeks ago."

"Yes." Joe managed a smile that did not reach his eyes as he extended his hand to Tyler. Kate knew he recognized Tyler as the man who had interrupted Joe and herself at the garage the day before.

Accepting the handshake, Tyler, too, smiled coldly. "Nice little town you have here."

Joe's smile faded. "I'm sure you must find it quite boring." Beneath the transparent veil of civility, the suggestion that Tyler should leave Piperville was blatant.

"As a matter of fact, I am enjoying it immensely," Tyler replied smoothly.

Joe offered Kate his arm. Momentarily she considered refusing it, but the look on her mother's face changed her mind. She allowed herself to be led toward the auction table. Life would be easier for her if she could avoid making Joe her enemy.

Her basket was the tenth to be auctioned.

"Twenty-five," Joe bid confidently, and Kate cringed.

"Thirty," a male voice suddenly offered.

Swinging around, she saw Tyler. He was smiling with innocent nonchalance.

Joe's smile became a scowl. "Thirty-five."

"Forty," Tyler countered.

The auctioneer beamed. People who were not part of the auction suddenly stopped what they were doing to watch.

"Fifty," Joe bid curtly.

"One hundred" came Tyler's easy response, his tone indicating he would go further if necessary.

"It appears your Mr. Langston enjoys playing games," Joe snarled at Kate. "Just keep in mind that I do not play," Joe warned threateningly, and with a contemptuous glance at Tyler, he walked away.

Tyler handed a one-hundred-dollar bill to the cashier, who in return gave him Kate's basket along with a bright, curious smile.

"You really do enjoy making my life difficult," Kate muttered accusingly as he took her by the arm and led her away from the crowd.

"My life isn't going to be so easy, either." His smile was mischievous as he brought them to a halt in the shade of an old oak. "Your mother is likely to have my bags on the porch when I return to the house."

For a moment, the appealing boyishness in his smile caused her heart to flutter, then she heard a twitter from one of the passing couples and a coldness swept over her. "This is not a joke. Joe is furious about this, and the ribbings he's going to get from folks are only going to make him madder."

Setting the basket down, Tyler placed a hand on the trunk of the tree on either side of her. "And here I saw myself as your knight in shining armor."

As she looked up into the dark depths of his eyes, a strange chill shook her. He did make quite a dashing rescuer. Then reality returned. To him, this was a game and he hadn't rescued her; he had only made an unpleasant situation worse. "I have no use for a weekend warrior, Mr. Langston," she said stiffly. "Enjoy your lunch." Then slipping under one of his arms, she marched off. Tyler did not follow.

"Kate." Joe spoke her name grimly as he fell into step beside her a few minutes later. "I want to talk to you—alone."

She allowed him to lead her across the street and around to the side of the bank. Opening the private entrance to his office, he stepped aside to allow her to enter ahead of him.

He opened the cabinet built into the dark paneled walls of the room to expose a complete bar with a sink and small refrigerator. The confidence in Joe's manner worried her.

Opening the refrigerator, he took out a bottle of champagne. "I thought we would celebrate our engagement."

Kate's posture became rigid. "I have already told you I have no intention of remarrying."

His eyes leisurely traveled over her as if savoring the moment. "On my desk you will find a sheet of paper with a number on it. That is the amount of money your mother owes me."

Licking her suddenly dry lips, Kate rose and crossed the room to the desk. No amount of apprehension could have prepared her for the number written on the sheet of paper. She said in a low, harsh whisper, "I don't believe this."

"Haven't you ever wondered how your mother paid for your father's funeral? And her hospital bills after the twins were born?" he asked with cynical amusement. "Your father left nothing but a string of bar bills and gambling debts." The smile on Joe's face deepened as he began removing the cork in the champagne bottle.

"I personally loaned her the necessary amount. She has given me small amounts back once in while, but her payments have never kept up with her borrowing."

"I'll pay you back every cent!"

"It would take you forever." Joe's smile vanished as his mouth formed a hard, straight line. "Unless you agree to marry me, I will call in the debt immediately. I should also mention that part of the debt involves a second mortgage on the house, and that garage of yours is sorely outdated. You couldn't raise more than fifteen or twenty thousand."

Kate's jaw tightened as she fought to keep her composure. He was right in his evaluation of her financial situation, but she refused to capitulate.

"I need some time to think," she said stiffly.

"Take all afternoon," he offered. "Just keep in mind that I

want to announce our engagement at the dance tonight." Pouring them each a glass of the sparkling wine, he carried her drink across the room. "To our future," he said, clinking his glass against hers.

Disgust filled her. "You can't really want a woman that you've had to blackmail into your bed."

"You're so naive." He ran a finger along the line of her jaw. "To me, you are merely Toby Riley's widow, and because of that, the thought of taking you into my bed and having complete control over you is more exciting than I ever dreamed possible."

Until this moment, she had never realized how truly possessed Joe was by his hatred of her dead husband. Fear showed momentarily on her face.

As he watched her, his smile broadened. "Yes, I think I'm going to enjoy this very much." Then, glancing at his watch, he breathed a sigh of regret.

"I'm afraid I'm due back at the park to judge the pie-eating contest." Rising from his chair, he caught her chin in his hand and tilted her head to place a light kiss on her lips. "Until tonight."

A little later Kate felt chilled, in spite of the hot July sun, as she stood with her mother and Tyler watching the children devour pieces of pie while holding their hands behind their backs.

"I spoke to Joe just before he began the judging," Harriet said, beaming at her daughter. With a side glance toward Tyler, she con-

tinued, "And I am now willing to forgive Mr. Langston for his behavior. Joe told me that the two of you had a very agreeable talk this afternoon."

Kate wanted to take her mother aside and demand to know how she could have placed her in this position, but Kate already knew the answer. Her mother was totally naive where men and money were concerned, and getting angry with her would not solve the problem. Instead, she forced herself to smile and nod.

When the contest ended, Joe joined them, slipping a possessive arm around Kate's waist. Kate's stomach churned. Knowing that she had to get away from the picnic and have some time to herself to collect her thoughts, she said, "I don't feel very well. I think the sun is too much for me." Kate struggled to keep her voice civil. "I think I should go home and rest for a while."

"If I didn't have to judge this next contest, I'd take you home," Joe said, smiling down on her.

The smile went no further than the corners of his mouth, and the look in his eyes turned Kate's blood to ice. "I can take myself home just fine," she assured him in carefully controlled, polite tones.

Joe relinquished his hold on her waist and said, "I'll come by and pick you up around eight."

"Fine." Forcing a smile, she walked away from the group.

BACK AT THE house, she scribbled a note to her mother and hurried out the front door.

"Going somewhere?" Tyler Langston's voice stopped her as she started down the porch stairs.

"I thought I'd go for a drive," she said, quickly resuming her move toward her car.

"Ever drive a Porsche?" he asked, as he caught up with her. He grasped her hand and placed the keys to his car in it, then headed to the Porsche and climbed in the passenger side.

As she stood watching him, a contemplative expression crossed her face. Maybe there was a solution to part of her problem, she thought. Reaching a decision, she approached the Porsche and climbed in behind the wheel.

Leaving town by a back road, she drove toward the ocean.

"Do you want to tell me what you're attempting to run away from?" Tyler asked.

"No." The response of the sleek car gave her a sense of power. But it was a pale substitute for the power she had lost over her life.

"Why does Joe Nieley hate your former husband?"

Her grip tightened on the wheel. A deep frown etched itself onto her features. "Both Joe and Toby fell in love with the same girl. She chose Joe because he could offer her more of life's luxuries, and Toby left town and enlisted in the army. The day of the wedding Joe discovered that his bride wasn't as pure as he'd thought. When Toby

returned to town a few years later after his stint in the military, she began to hang around Toby's garage. He never reacted to any of her advances, though, and then he married me. She was furious. She left town and filed for a divorce. Behind Joe's back, they said he'd been used...that she had only married him for his money...that she had made a fool of him. It fed his hatred of Toby. He tried several times to force Toby into bankruptcy. He even tried to start a fight by making a pass at me." Kate drew a harsh breath. "I thought that when Toby died that would be the end of it."

Kate turned onto a small side road, then drove along the rocky coastline for a short distance. At last she pulled off onto the side of the road, and climbed out. Scrambling over large boulders, she came to a small private stretch of beach sandwiched between the tall, rough-edged rocks. She came here whenever she wanted to be alone.

She stared out at the ocean. She knew what she wanted to happen next. She just wasn't at all certain how to achieve it, and she did not have a great deal of time. As Tyler joined her, she chewed self-consciously on her bottom lip. He was definitely an attractive man. She recalled the way his lips had felt when he'd kissed her and was able to assure herself that what she was about to do would not be unbearably distasteful.

"Why do I have the distinct feeling I'm being sized up as if I

were a racehorse you're considering betting your savings on?" he asked.

She forced herself to smile. "Surely you've been looked over by a woman before."

"True," he admitted, "but I knew what they wanted."

Swinging her gaze back to the ocean, she fought to keep her tone nonchalant. "I'm not so different."

"That's a 180-degree change in attitude."

"I thought men expected women to change their minds," she tossed back, watching the sunlight fade into evening dusk. She was running out of time. Running a hand through her perspiration-dampened hair, she said, "Have you ever gone skinny-dipping?"

His gaze narrowed as he studied her profile. "A couple of times."

She got to her feet in one quick, fluid movement. Standing facing him, she caught the bottom of her T-shirt and pulled it off before she lost her nerve. Letting it fall to the sand, she reached around behind her to unfasten her bra with trembling fingers.

"Would you like some help?"

She didn't want to say no, but she also didn't want him walking behind her and seeing her back. "Thanks, but I have it," she murmured in what she hoped were seductive tones.

She saw his body tense as he studied the fullness of her breasts. *Don't blow it now*, she warned herself and, reaching to grasp the

bottom edges of his shirt, heard herself say, "Will you join me?"

He stood motionless as she began lifting his shirt. Her breasts brushed seductively against his bared chest.

The dark intensity of his gaze made her knees feel strangely weak. Then he reached for her. "You do surprise me, Kate," he murmured.

His lips found hers. As she let her body melt against his, the rough hair on his chest brushed against her softer flesh. Soon the rest of their clothing joined what was already on the ground.

He knew how to touch a woman, and for the first time she knew the sensation of desperately wanting a man. But as he laid her gently on the sand, panic threatened. Swallowing it back, she closed her eyes and told herself she was doing this for Toby.

Her teeth closed over her bottom lip, holding back a cry of pain as he possessed her. After an initial look of surprise, he resumed his lovemaking, rekindling her desire and expertly bringing her body to a level of excitement and pleasure she had never before known.

Afterward she lay looking up at the first stars to light the night sky while the sound of the ocean filled her ears. She could feel him watching her. She reached for her clothes.

Tyler caught Kate by her upper arms and lifted her to her feet. "I want to know what's going on! You were a virgin."

She tried to jerk free. "I was hoping you wouldn't notice."

"You were married." His voice was puzzled.

"Toby was injured in the military. He wasn't capable..." She let her words drift away.

Drawing a sharp breath, Tyler practically lifted her off her feet as he brought their faces closer together. "Why me?"

Time was passing and Kate had to get home. Deciding that honesty was best, she said tightly, "Because it would mean nothing to you. Now let go of me!"

He did as requested. Grabbing her clothes, she backed into the deep shadows of the rocks and dressed.

As she slipped on her shoes, she glanced toward him to find him pulling on his shirt. "I'll meet you at the car," she said, starting toward the rocky incline.

"No, you won't." Catching her by the arm, he jerked her to a halt. "This has something to do with Joe Nieley."

"But it has nothing to do with you!" she snarled. "Now let go of me."

Ignoring her demand, he continued to regard her darkly. "This morning you didn't even want to share a picnic basket with him. But this afternoon you seduced me, obviously to protect your former husband's secret. That leads me to believe that Joe Nieley must have a pretty powerful hold over you—one he has decided to use to force you to marry him." He stood like

a granite wall blocking her escape. If she didn't get back soon, Joe was certain to suspect something. "It's money," she said at last. "My mother borrowed a large sum from Joe without my knowledge. Either I marry him, or he'll call in the debt immediately." Then she added acidly, "I suppose I should be flattered to know that I'm worth almost as much as a Porsche."

He drew a harsh breath. "I'll give you the money."

"You'll what?" She stared at him incredulously.

"I will give you the money," he repeated in a cold, level voice.

She hesitated only a moment. "I'll pay you back, every cent plus interest," she promised, barely able to believe his offer.

"What you will do is marry me."

Her eyes widened. She felt as if she was suddenly caught in a new nightmare. "You can't be serious."

Releasing her, he leaned against a rock and regarded her dryly. "My father was quite taken with you. Apparently he suspected that one day Joe Nieley was going to back you into a corner you couldn't get out of, so he decided to provide you with an alternative—me."

"I don't believe this," she muttered.

His jaw twitched angrily. "My father has threatened to divide his voting stock between myself, my brother and my sister unless I marry you. But I did get him to

agree that if we found we were not compatible, the marriage has to last only two years. Therefore, what I am proposing is a two-year arrangement. I will provide you with a monthly allowance plus a large settlement sum at the time of the divorce."

"You're serious," she breathed, staring at him.

"I want control of Langston Industries and you want control of your life," he said tersely. "It's a better deal than what Joe Nieley is offering." Picking up his shoes, he pulled them on. "May I assume we have an agreement?"

"I..." She thought of refusing. Tyler Langston frightened her. Then she considered the alternative and heard herself say in firm tones, "Yes."

Nodding, he motioned for her to precede him up the rocky incline and back to the car.

She settled in the passenger seat. Nothing seemed real. Glancing at Tyler, she noted the taut line of his jaw and was reminded of a bear caught in a trap. *Join the crowd*, she thought acidly. *I've been in that trap most of my life.*

JOE WAS waiting on the porch when they arrived at the house. "Your mother tried to tell me that you were sleeping," he said to Kate contemptuously as she and Tyler started up the steps toward him. "But Harriet was never any good at lying." His expression was an open declaration of war.

"Contrary to what you're implying," Tyler said coldly, "what my fiancée does with her time is none of your business."

Disbelief mingled with outrage on Joe's face. "*Your* fiancée?"

"Yes, *my* fiancée," Tyler confirmed.

Joe's gaze swung to Kate and his tone became threatening. "If you think—"

Tyler cut Joe short, his voice ice. "What my fiancée thinks is also none of your business," he snapped.

"However, you and I do have some business to conduct. I want the papers for the repayment of that loan drawn up and ready for me to pick up and send to my lawyer by ten tomorrow morning."

Joe's complexion was turning purple. "You cannot order me around!"

Tyler's eyes narrowed dangerously. "If you give me any trouble or if you give Kate or her family any further trouble, I will mention your name to a few friends of mine in the financial community at the federal level. No man should be allowed to use his power and wealth to force others to do his bidding." The hint of a derisive smile curled a corner of Tyler's mouth. "I wouldn't be surprised if an investigation of your practices didn't turn up several incidences of unethical, if not illegal, behavior."

Joe's face contorted into an ugly expression of anger. "I don't like being threatened."

"No one does," Tyler said, glancing at Kate.

Kate was shocked by the note of fear that crept from behind Joe's rage as he and Tyler faced each other. She had never known him to be afraid of anyone. Glancing back at her questionable champion, she realized just how powerful an opponent Tyler Langston could be.

Suddenly Joe expelled a harsh breath and stalked past them off the porch and down the street.

"It's so comforting to know that you don't believe in someone using his wealth and power to force others to do his bidding," Kate noted.

The intensity in the brown depths of Tyler's eyes made her shiver. "The agreement we have will be as advantageous to you as it will be to me. Of course, if you prefer continuing to negotiate with Joe Nieley . . ." He left the sentence open, pausing to give her a chance to respond.

"You're right," she admitted grudgingly. Just the thought of Joe touching her caused her skin to crawl.

She told herself she had to think of her relationship with Tyler Langston strictly as a business agreement. The problem there was that sharing the man's bed added a very unbusinesslike flavor to the arrangement.

“YOU LOOK very nice today,” Tyler commented, breaking the silence that filled the Porsche as, one week later, they drove down the Maine coast as Mr. and Mrs. Tyler Langston.

“Thank you,” Kate murmured. Kate felt her stomach knot. She was married to a man who was practically a stranger and was on her way to a totally alien environment. The Langston family was part of Bostonian upper society. Looking down at her work-roughened hands, she wondered how she was going to fit into his life even for two years.

The continuing silence in the car only added to her tenseness: “You haven’t told me where we are going,” she said, forcing a conversational tone into her voice.

“I arranged to have some time away from the office. We’re going to New York.”

Her back muscles tensed painfully. She felt a strong need to go somewhere quiet, where she could have a few days to adjust to this new, albeit temporary, life in front of her. “I was wondering,” she said carefully, “if it would be possible for us to find a place on a beach or in the mountains for a few days. The glance he sent her brought a scarlet flush to her cheeks, and she added tightly, “This may have been a typical week for you, but for me it’s been exhausting.”

“We are going to New York for a purpose.” Raking a hand through his hair, he said, “Your clothes are fine for the society in which you’ve traveled. But in the society in which you’re going to travel for the next two years, designer labels are important. You will also need a few pieces of good jewelry. You are my wife, and I expect you to look and act the part.”

“Maybe you would like me to take elocution lessons and a course in table manners,” she suggested acidly.

The hint of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. “Luckily you somehow managed to escape having a strong New England accent, and I’ve noticed that you use a knife and fork and you don’t slurp your soup.”

She was about to tell him what she thought of his superior attitude when an underlying inflection in his voice caused her to study him more closely. His smile, though derisive, was self-directed. He was ridiculing his own snobbery! She sat back in her seat. Tyler Langston was not going to be an easy man to get to know. But what really bothered her was that she was beginning to want to know him.

WEDDING NIGHTS, she mused, at least in her case, were not all they were purported to be.

She had settled on being asleep when he came out of the bathroom that night. But as exhausted

as she was, sleep hadn't come as easily as she had hoped. To her dismay, she was still awake when she heard the knob on the door turning.

Turning off the lights, Tyler climbed into the bed. As he rolled over onto his side, placing his back toward hers, he said quietly, "Good night, Kate," in a voice that left no doubt he knew she was still awake.

Grudgingly she admitted to herself that she'd expected, perhaps even anticipated, more aggressive behavior from him. That he found her so undesirable came as an ego-crushing blow. She heard Tyler snoring gently for what seemed like hours before she dozed off.

SHE AWOKE slowly to the feel of strong arms around her and warm lips trailing kisses along the sensitive cords at the back of her neck. "You are much too soft and inviting to resist any longer," Tyler murmured huskily in her ear.

"You didn't have any trouble last night," she muttered, sharply recalling the insult she had felt.

"Last night I was being thoughtful," he said, turning her onto her back and levering himself on an elbow so that he could look down into her face. His eyes darkened with purpose. His free hand was moving in leisurely exploration along her body, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. He claimed her mouth in a demand for possession that sent her blood racing through her veins.

Later, as she lay beside him, she could not fault his lovemaking in any way. He had never forgotten that there were two people involved.

"You must have had a great deal of practice," she mused, smiling softly and running her fingers over the hard, warm surface of his chest. "You're very good at making love."

Levering himself up on an elbow, he smiled down at her. "It's easy with you. You have a beautiful body."

Suddenly Kate had to fight to keep the smile on her face. Her body... He hadn't seen...

Dropping a kiss on her shoulder, he said in low, gruff tones, "I would love to linger here with you all day, but we only have a week in New York before I have to be back in Boston." Slipping out of bed, he headed toward the bathroom. "Why don't you order us some breakfast while I shave?"

When she was alone in the room, the words "beautiful body" played over and over in Kate's mind.

Theirs was a shallow relationship based solely on self-interest, she reminded herself. That her body might not be as perfect as he thought shouldn't really matter. Still, the tension his words had caused multiplied. She found herself recalling the little plaque she had seen inside his shaving kit. No doubt Linda had an unflawed body....

SHE FOUND herself in the dress department of one of the most expensive stores on Fifth Avenue. The saleswoman was much more helpful than Kate would have liked, popping in and out of the dressing room with a fresh arm-load of dresses every few minutes. This constant invasion of her privacy set Kate's already raw nerves on edge.

It also didn't help her mood to see the way the other saleswomen, as well as some of the shoppers, looked Tyler over with interest, as if they were considering buying him and taking him home.

Shopping for matching shoes and a purse came next. Then he insisted on purchasing a necklace, earrings and a gem-studded cocktail ring to complete the ensemble.

By the time they returned to the hotel, Kate's nerves were as tight as bowstrings. As they entered their hotel room loaded down with packages, he said, "Most women would have enjoyed a shopping spree like the one I've just taken you on."

"I'm just not used to spending so much money." She avoided his eyes.

Breaching the distance between them, he turned her toward him, his fingers closing around her upper arms. "I want to know what is going on," he demanded grimly. "This cool withdrawal of yours didn't start with the purchase of that dress. It started this morning. When I went into the bathroom, you were smiling. When I came

out, you exhibited the warmth of an ice cube. What happened? Did your precious Toby come back into your mind and make you feel as if you were somehow betraying him by enjoying yourself with me?"

"Toby has nothing to do with this," she managed.

"Don't lie, Kate!" His hands tightened on her arms.

"You're hurting me!" she cried, attempting to pull free.

Looking at his hands as if only then realizing that he was even touching her, Tyler immediately released his hold. He raked a hand through his hair. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

His obvious remorse made her heart stop its wild pounding. It was the fear of being hurt that had caused her overreaction. "You didn't hurt me really," she murmured, adding in level tones, "and Toby, though I cared about him very much, has nothing to do with us." Then, unable to continue to face Tyler, she turned away and crossed the room to stand staring out the window at the park.

"Kate," Tyler said, breaking the silence. "It's going to be a long two years if we don't settle whatever it is that's bothering you."

"I know," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "This is very difficult for me. I know you are used to the very best...that you have never had to settle for anything less than perfect—until you were forced into this marriage."

She unfastened her dress and let it fall to the floor to give him a full

view of her lower back, an expanse of skin crisscrossed by thin vicious-looking scars.

"How?" he demanded gruffly.

She avoided his eyes as she found her robe and put it on. "My father used to beat me when he was drunk, which was most of the time," she answered woodenly.

"And your mother let him?"

"He beat her, too," she said as vivid memories caused her face to pale.

"And so you married Toby when you were barely sixteen to escape from your father." Tyler frowned.

"It would be more correct to say that Toby married me," she replied. She still could not bring herself to face him. "When Toby came back from his stint in the army, he did a lot of drinking. Adjusting to his injuries was difficult, to say the least. He became one of my father's regular drinking buddies. One night my father came home roaring drunk and started to beat me. I tried to get away and fell down the stairs. I was knocked unconscious. My father panicked. He called Toby to help him get me to a hospital. But on the way there, I came to in the car, screaming for him not to hit me again."

Kate paused to draw a deep breath, then said, "That was when Toby decided to make me his domestic affair, as he liked to put it." A tight smile played at the corners of Kate's mouth momentarily, then vanished. "Toby was big, and

while he was normally gentle as a lamb, he could be dangerous when provoked. After the ceremony, Toby told my father that he also considered my mother under his protection. So after that, my father did his brawling in the bars instead of at home."

Forcing herself to face Tyler, she finished apologetically. "I'm sorry. I know you didn't want me for a wife in the first place, and at least, if I couldn't be socially right, I could offer you physical beauty. Instead I have hideous defects, and I . . ." Unable to go on, Kate buried her face in her hands.

Tyler moved toward her, reaching out to tilt her tear-wet face upward to meet his gaze. "The scars don't bother me, Kate," he said. "You must believe me."

Looking into the dark depths of his eyes, she saw the honesty there. As relief spread through her, she realized, almost with shock, how much his attitude mattered to her. It was much more than she wanted to admit.

*

DURING THEIR TIME in New York he had been the perfect bridegroom. He had been attentive, made interesting conversation, taken her to the most popular Broadway shows, chosen fabulous restaurants for them to dine in and treated her to shopping sprees that would have been envied by any woman.

A warm current shot through her as she recalled his insistence on

beginning the second shopping spree with the purchase of undergarments, many of which were French imports.

"A woman should dress to please her husband," he had whispered in her ear when she looked questioningly at two expensive bits of lace that were supposed to be panties and a bra. "Just think what a lift it will give me when we're sitting through a boring dinner to look at you and know that beneath a sedate, very proper outer covering is a body clothed in lingerie sexy enough to turn a man's blood to hot lava."

Fighting down a threatening blush, she'd rewarded him with a "men will be boys" smile.

From lingerie, they progressed to sports clothes and finished with a full wardrobe topped off with two evening gowns and some very elegant pieces of jewelry. She knew he was simply dressing her to fit the image she was supposed to project as his wife. Even the Broadway shows and the meals were purposeful. The shows would provide her with topics of conversation that would produce a veneer of culture. He threw in a few museum tours for the same reason. And the meals at the various restaurants had educated her palate. Yet, during the entire time, he'd acted as if he was honestly enjoying himself, making her feel less like Eliza Doolittle and more like a woman whose loving husband was intent on spoiling her.

Nothing Tyler had said fully prepared Kate for the sprawling Langston estate that covered several acres outside of Boston. The building itself was a massive structure three stories high, with wings spreading out on both sides from what had once been the original manor house.

Nothing could have prepared Kate for the reception Tyler's sister, Claire, planned for the newlyweds, either.

"A sort of after-the-fact wedding reception," Claire had elaborated.

"You should have consulted me before making any plans," Tyler reprimanded her irritably. "Kate and I are tired. It would be better to put that sort of thing off for a couple of days."

"I could cancel," Claire said in honeyed tones. "But then our friends might think that you're embarrassed to introduce Kate to them."

Tyler's gaze narrowed dangerously. "All right. Have your little party. Is it formal or informal?"

"Formal. I would offer Kate something to wear, but I'm afraid that nothing I own would fit her." A Cheshire cat grin belied the apology in Claire's voice.

"I'm sure I can find something suitable," Kate said.

The maid suddenly appeared behind Claire, her arms full of Kate's new clothing. "I'll have these pressed before they're hung, Mrs. Langston," she said.

Claire's smile became a pout. "Tyler must have had every seamstress in New York working their little fingers to the bone," she muttered sarcastically.

"I didn't want Kate's lack of the proper attire to cause her any grief," he said.

Claire swung back toward him, a gleam sparkling in her eyes. "I suppose this marriage means you'll give up that cozy apartment in town, the one you use for those, ah, all-night business meetings."

"It has already been sublet," he replied, the tightening of his jaw indicating he was very close to losing his temper.

"Too bad." She sighed regretfully. "Life is going to be dull around here without Father storming through the house in the evenings demanding to know who you're bedding on any particular evening."

Kate felt her stomach twist, but outwardly she showed no reaction to Claire's obvious baiting.

THE PARTY began easily enough. Everyone was, at least on the surface, polite and friendly. Even Claire was well behaved.

One of the men was describing a trip he had recently taken to China, and Kate was actually beginning to relax when a sudden hush fell over the room.

Following everyone's line of vision, Kate saw a woman standing at the entrance to the room. The gown she wore was cut low, and the material draped gently along

the lines of her body, showing off a figure that brought a low whistle from a couple of the men.

"Tyler." The redhead smiled brightly and moved toward the group in which Tyler and Kate were standing. The others in the cluster backed away a little, almost as if they sensed a skirmish coming.

After kissing Tyler lightly on the cheek with a familiarity that caused Kate's toes to curl, the woman turned her full attention to Kate. "I'm Linda McGregor, an old friend of the family, and I want to wish you and Tyler the very best," she said in a low, throaty voice. Kate didn't miss the ice in those green eyes as she accepted the handshake.

Linda's smile broadened while the ice in her eyes crystallized. "I hope you won't mind if I borrow Tyler once in a while for some business advice." Her gaze shifted to Tyler. "My mother has finally decided to retire. That means I'll be taking over as chairman of the board at Chandra Cosmetics. I know I'll be running into difficulties occasionally so I hope you won't mind if I call on you to discuss various positions I might take."

"I could have sworn that Linda was already an expert in all of the positions," a woman behind Kate muttered.

Kate slipped an arm through Tyler's, and with a smile, said coolly, "As long as you keep in mind that he's only available dur-

ing business hours and in public places."

Linda's eyes glittered challengingly. "Public places are so stifling to intense business conver—"

"Kate!" Uriah Langston's voice boomed from the doorway, rescuing her from a cattish fray. There was no doubt in her mind that Linda McGregor was the Linda who had given Tyler the shaving kit.

Approaching Kate, Uriah said loudly and distinctly, "I'm so sorry I wasn't here to greet you when you arrived today. I had an all-day business meeting. It's so good to have you here at last." He gave her a giant bear hug.

Uriah released her, and his gaze played briefly over Linda before he focused his attention on Tyler. "I hope you've been taking good care of Kate."

"She's doing an adequate job of taking care of herself," Tyler responded dryly. "Linda was just telling us she will be taking over as chairman of the board at Chandra Cosmetics. Perhaps you could give her a few pointers."

"I'd love to." Uriah beamed, turning to Linda as Tyler slipped an arm around Kate's waist and led her toward the other side of the room.

For Kate, the evening was ruined. She managed to present an amicable front, but she constantly found herself glancing at Linda. By the time the evening was over and the last guest had finally left, she began to wish wholeheartedly

that Uriah Langston had never set foot in Piperville.

Accompanying Tyler to their rooms, Kate promised herself to say nothing about the evening, but her mind and mouth refused to cooperate. "That woman issued you a blatant invitation in front of everyone," she accused.

Tyler was watching her intently. "You actually sound jealous."

Pride stiffened Kate's back. "I'm beginning to wonder if your mind is elsewhere when we are in bed together," she said, the thought knotting her stomach.

"I always know who I'm with." Crossing the distance between them, he caught her chin in his hand, tracing the line of her jaw with the tips of his fingers. Drawing her into his embrace, he kissed the turned-down corners of her mouth.

Kate knew she was playing a fool's game but didn't care. She wanted to be in Tyler's arms and, at least for a while, pretend he wanted to belong to her alone.

Meeting his lips with a hunger of her own, she ran her hands over his shoulders to the back of his neck, caressing the strong, hard cords as her body melted invitingly against his. Slipping off his dinner jacket, she unfastened his tie and tossed it aside. Then, unfastening the top button of his shirt, she kissed the hollow of his neck. His flesh had an intoxicating flavor. Slowly she trailed kisses upward toward his mouth. She had wanted him be-

fore, but never with so frightening an intensity.

A low laugh issued from deep in his throat only to be drowned out by the sudden ringing of the phone.

"Damn!" Tyler glanced toward the instrument on the bedside table. "That has to be Hong Kong." For a moment he hesitated, then with a second muttered "Damn," he gave Kate a quick apologetic kiss, moved away and picked up the phone.

Walking over to the closet, she kicked off her shoes, then slipped off her panty hose. She glanced back toward Tyler. Linda, she thought curtly, would never let a phone call interfere with her plans.

Purposefully walking over to where Tyler was sitting on the edge of the bed, she knelt in front of him and began to unfasten the buttons of his shirt, kissing each newly exposed area of flesh as she went. His breathing became ragged and she smiled, knowing that she could make him want her. When the shirt fell freely open, she brushed her cheek against his hair-roughened chest, luxuriating in its hot hard warmth. Her hands, resting on his thighs, felt his leg muscles tense, and currents of excitement flowed through her. She had never realized before how stimulating arousing a man could be.

Placing a hand over the mouth-piece, he frowned down at her. "Kate . . ." he said warily.

Her lips formed a pout as she breathed a resigned sigh and rose from her kneeling position in front of him. Standing a short distance away, she slowly finished unbuttoning her dress. As she slipped it off, she felt a prickling sensation and glanced at Tyler to find him watching her, his eyes dark with desire.

"Use your own judgment," he growled into the receiver, then dropped it into the cradle. Rising from the bed, he quickly crossed the distance between them.

She trembled as his hands moved possessively along the lines of her body, pausing to play with the small bits of lace underclothing before removing them. Then, drawing her down beside him on the bed, he growled, "Remind me never to take you to the office."

*

THE SATISFIED smile remained on Kate's face all the next day until the moment Claire stopped by her room.

"My father already thinks you're perfect. He thinks I should get to know you better . . . that you might be able to 'improve' me," Claire said.

"I'm not perfect, nor do I make a habit of trying to improve other people," Kate replied tightly.

Claire came to a spot directly opposite Kate and regarded her musingly. "I have to admit that I'm very surprised by my brother's choice for a bride."

"No more than I was," Kate answered honestly.

A tiny smile played at the corners of Claire's mouth. "I always expected that, if he married, it would be to further business interests. I expected Tyler's choice either to be very wealthy in her own right or to have a controlling interest in a company he was interested in." A malicious challenge glittered in Claire's eyes. "Do you have any hidden assets, Kate?"

"No," Kate managed levelly. Claire knew her brother well.

She regarded Kate with a studious frown. "It's hard to imagine my brother in love. He's always had a certain coolness about him, and his views on marriage have been cynical, to say the least."

Kate felt as if she was being stalked, and her back stiffened. "Maybe," she suggested cuttingly, "he was reacting to some of the marriages he saw around him."

Claire's eyes were ice. "My father was the reason for my marriages falling apart. He was constantly accusing me of making irresponsible choices. My father," she said with biting sarcasm, "bought off my third husband behind my back."

"A man who can be bought off isn't worth having," Kate returned.

"And what about a wife?" Claire threw back. For a long moment she watched Kate in cold silence, then walked with haughty dignity from the room.

As she stared at the closed door, Kate felt ill. She wondered if Claire knew the truth behind her marriage to Tyler. No one was supposed to know. Even Uriah didn't have all of the facts.

She's just guessing, Kate's voice of reason assured her. *You were poor and you married rich. There are a lot of people who'll believe you did it for the money.*

And when it came right down to the bottom line, she had! Kate reminded herself curtly. That was why Claire's parting shot had hit its mark.

How could she have been so stupid as to allow herself to fall in love with Tyler Langston?

THE NEXT MORNING the thought of remaining in the house without Tyler unnerved her. As much as she tried, she did not feel at home.

That's because you aren't, her voice of reason pointed out. *You are simply a temporary occupant.*

The thought didn't help her restlessness. She went out into the rose garden. But as pretty as it was, she wasn't the type to spend her days loitering in a garden. Besides, there was the possibility that Claire might decide to join her for another little chat.

Without really thinking about where she was going, she found herself nearing the garage. A silver-and-gray Rolls with the hood up was parked in the wide driveway, and interest sparked within her.

William, the chauffeur, had spread a blanket over the fenders on each side of the hood to protect the finish from his tools and the grease. As she approached, he looked up from the manual he'd been frowning at. "Is there something I can do for you, Mrs. Langston?"

"No," Kate replied with an equally polite smile. Then in mildly hesitant tones, she said, "Actually, if you don't mind, I would like to take a look under the hood. I've never seen a Rolls engine."

"Be my guest," he invited.

She looked with fascination at what was considered one of the best made cars in the world. "It's beautiful."

"But it doesn't sound beautiful." William's frown returned. "I can't seem to locate the problem."

"May I look at the manual?" Kate asked, her gaze traveling to the book he had laid aside.

William was obviously uncertain of how to handle the situation. "I can't impose on you, Mrs. Langston," he said with stiff politeness.

"It's not an imposition." Doing nothing was slowly driving her crazy. "Working on a Rolls would be an honor," she said, and before he could refuse her offer again, she asked, "Do you have an extra pair of coveralls?"

IT WAS LATE in the afternoon when they solved the problem. Wiping the grease from her hands, she slid

behind the wheel and switched on the ignition. The Rolls purred.

"Nice work, Mrs. Langston," William said as she turned the car off.

"It was my pleasure," she assured him.

The sound of a car coming up the drive caught her attention. Turning around, she saw Tyler's Porsche.

He parked in the garage and walked toward them, his expression shuttered. "May I assume from the smiles on your faces that the Rolls is fixed?" he asked, his cool gaze traveling from William to Kate.

"Yes, sir." William was immediately the proper servant, his smile replaced by a respectful expression.

Tyler's attention never left Kate. "You have a grease smear on your cheek. Perhaps you should consider returning to the house now in order to give yourself time to clean up and dress for dinner."

She set her mouth in a tight, straight line as she met Tyler's cool gaze with a matching frostiness. "I was just on my way."

"I apologize, Mr. Tyler," William said in formal tones. "I shouldn't have taken up Mrs. Langston's time with my work."

Kate turned to face William. "You didn't ask for my help—I insisted." Then before any more could be said, she stalked to the house. Tyler fell into step beside her. She glanced toward him hos-

tilely. "You embarrassed me in front of William," she hissed.

"You should have known better," Tyler said, his tone like that of an adult speaking to a difficult child. "You, whom the servants see as one day becoming the mistress of Langston Hall, spent the day doing the chauffeur's work for him."

"If he was the gardener, no one would have objected," she argued. "I've seen pictures of women, the very cream of society, working in their gardens."

"You've seen them cutting a few flowers," Tyler corrected.

"Then I apologize for not living up to the Langston name," Kate snapped.

"Well, well, if it isn't our female mechanic home from a hard day at the garage," Claire said as they crossed the hallway.

Kate was tempted to make a response, but feeling Tyler's cold glare on the back of her neck, she continued up the stairs to the bedroom.

Kate turned to Tyler, her jaw tightened defensively. "I'll go crazy if I have to sit around this house for two years with nothing constructive to occupy my time. I have to have something to do."

Then because she was afraid she might lose control and refused to let him see her cry, she stalked into the bathroom.

THE SUN streaming through the windows of her sitting room could not brighten Kate's spirit the next morning.

"I may become a leading expert of sights to see in and around Boston," she mused grimly, pausing to stare down at the rose garden below and wishing she could interest herself in gardening. "Of course, there's always volunteer work."

A knock on the door interrupted her frustrated contemplations.

"A man is here with, uh, something for you," the housekeeper announced dubiously. "I thought perhaps it was a mistake, but the man insists it's for you."

Kate followed Nancy down the stairs and out the front door. Her eyes traveled past a truck to the flatbed trailer. On the trailer sat what had once been a very expensive sports car. Now its paint was an indistinguishable color, the tires were bald and the leather upholstery was torn, its stuffing half-in, half-out. Adding a slash of incongruity was a bright red ribbon wrapped around the hood.

"Kate Langston?" the young driver said hopefully.

"Yes," Kate said, nodding, a slow smile beginning to form on her face.

"If you'll just sign here—" the young man extended his clipboard in Kate's direction. Nancy, who had been watching in silence, suddenly spoke up. "There's a note attached to the steering wheel."

A happy excitement filled her as she climbed onto the flatbed trailer and untied the note from the steering wheel. Her eyes glittered as she read:

Dear Kate,
You are a challenge, and since one challenge deserves another, I thought this gift might appeal to you.

Tyler

He did understand! Tears glistened in her eyes.

"I do suppose that Mr. Langston knows what he's doing," the housekeeper said uncertainly.

Tyler Langston always knows what he's doing, Kate's inner voice said.

FOUR MONTHS later Kate stood in nearly the same spot in which she had first seen the Jaguar. The now fully operable vintage car had new kid-leather upholstery and its exterior was painted white and polished to a high luster. Her masterpiece was finished.

A smile played across her face as she recalled the laughter in Tyler's eyes when he had arrived home from work the night of the car's arrival and she had thanked him profusely. "Keeping you happy, Kate," he'd said, "is proving to be a very unique undertaking."

She'd expected him to ignore her activities once he was satisfied her time was being occupied in a way that kept her appeased. But to her surprise, there had been several instances when he had taken time out

of his busy schedule to work with her in the garage.

"I must say you've worked a miracle," Claire said, interrupting Kate's reminiscences and coming out of the house to join her.

"It's a shame Tyler isn't here to break a bottle of champagne over the hood, or something to that effect," she mused.

"Yes, it is," Kate agreed regretfully.

Tyler had flown to Texas three weeks earlier. The organizational mess his brother, Ross, had created at the Houston offices of Langston Industries became painfully evident, and Tyler had been forced to fly out to straighten out the chaos. The process that Tyler had hoped would be finished in two weeks had lengthened into three. Although she tried not to, Kate missed him terribly.

"However," Claire went on, "he is due in this afternoon. William is supposed to meet him at the airport, but why don't you go in your Jaguar and surprise him?"

"That's a wonderful idea!" With an excited smile at Claire, Kate hurried toward the garage.

A LITTLE BEFORE one-fifteen she parked near the side door of the hangar to which the small company jet would taxi. Her heart was pounding wildly as the sleek white two-engine plane landed.

She walked quickly toward the plane as it came to a halt. The door was opened and the steps lowered and—

But it wasn't Tyler who was the first to make an appearance. It was a woman with flaming red hair. It was Linda McGregor.

"Thank you so much, Tyler," she was saying over her shoulder in warmly seductive tones. "I'm so glad you were able to arrange an extra week."

She didn't wait to hear any more. Running back to the Jaguar, she heard Tyler call her name. Not pausing to look back, she sped from the hangar area as if she was running from the devil himself.

She didn't know where she was going. She only knew she wasn't returning to Langston Hall. During her life, she had suffered a lot of pain, but nothing had ever hurt like this. She felt betrayed and humiliated.

"It's your own stupid fault," she muttered, as she turned north onto the interstate. She had been foolish to forget that what she and Tyler had was strictly a business agreement.

KATE DROVE for hours, stopping only for gas. The balmy weather she had left in Boston turned to the chill of a Maine November. She was grateful for the full moon that lit her way as she pulled over to the side of the road and left the car. She made her way over the rocks to the small stretch of beach where her involvement with Tyler had begun. The ocean pounded against the rocks around her, its frigid salty spray dampening her. How well she recalled her seduction of Tyler, and then his coolly deliv-

ered business offer. She shivered and continued to stand motionless, surrounded by the sounds of an angry ocean.

Slowly another sound began to register on her senses. It was the whirring of a helicopter. Suddenly the darkness enclosing her was shattered by the beam of a strong spotlight. Her kinship with the night had been broken. There was no doubt in her mind that Tyler was in that helicopter.

She heard the aircraft maneuvering inland. After a while, she saw Tyler coming over the rocks, the strong beam of a flashlight illuminating his way.

"Put this on," he ordered, taking off the heavy coat he was wearing as he reached her. "It's freezing."

Her hands came up defensively in front of her and she stepped back. "Stay away from me."

She scrambled up the rocks toward the waiting Jaguar. But Tyler was right behind her, and he caught her by the arm. "You are coming back with me."

A barely decipherable "no" came out of her mouth as the cold pervaded every inch of her.

The helicopter had landed nearby and a man climbed out. "Need some help, Mr. Langston?" he asked.

"You can drive the Jaguar back to Boston," Tyler ordered.

"Yes, sir," the man said with a nod.

Inside the helicopter, Tyler wrapped Kate in blankets and ordered the pilot to take off.

The sound made by the craft prohibited talking, a fact for which she was grateful.

It seemed an eternity before the helicopter began its descent. Kate peered in puzzlement at the wooded estate lit by the aircraft's powerful beam below. It wasn't Langston Hall.

When it landed on the large lawn, Tyler lifted Kate out and carried her toward the house.

"Put me down!" she demanded.

"It's supposed to be good luck for a husband to carry his wife over the threshold," he growled back.

"I'm not your wife any longer," she snarled.

He entered the house and continued up a wide curved staircase. "In spite of what that little scene at the airport implied, I did not spend any time with Linda in Houston. She showed up about the time my plane was getting ready for departure and asked for a ride home."

"How convenient," Kate muttered dryly.

"Convenience had nothing to do with it," he said, carrying her down a corridor. "It was Claire's doing. It seems she overheard my father first insisting that I marry you. That she found out about the money I had spent on your family, and she reasoned that it was fair game for her to try to break up our marriage. She told Linda that I realized what a terrible mistake I'd made. Claire said if you were to become jealous and leave me, then I could use that as a way out. She

convinced Linda that it was worth a try. So Linda staged that bit of playacting for you this afternoon."

They had entered a furnished master bedroom, and he unceremoniously dumped Kate on the bed.

"Where are we?" she asked. It was an irrelevant question at this point, but she wasn't ready to deal with the relevant ones yet.

"We are in our new home," he said levelly.

"There has never really been an *our*," she pointed out as she fought to keep the catch out of her voice. "I don't want you to lose control of Langston Industries, but there must be some other way."

"There is and I've already taken it," he said gruffly. "I have resigned." Cupping her face in his hands, he tilted it upward to meet the urgent pleading in his eyes. "I love you, Kate."

Tears began to trickle down her cheeks. Softly his lips brushed them away. "It just took me a long time to admit it, even to myself." He paused and shook his head in self-reproach. "I was jealous of your former husband, because you had loved him so much you were willing to seduce a stranger to keep his secret. I love you and I need you, Kate. I bought this house because I wanted us to have a life together. I had planned to bring you here as soon as I came back from Houston."

His embrace and his words were intoxicating. She wanted to lose herself in his warmth. Her eyes

glistened as the uncertainty that had haunted them vanished completely. He loved her and he needed her! She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. But instead she asked shakily, "Does this place have a garage?"

"A very well-equipped one," he assured her.

"In that case," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck, "wild horses couldn't drag me away."

"It's a bit shattering to my ego to know I'm being loved for my garage," he growled, nipping her earlobe admonishingly.

MUCH LATER, as he lay beside her, Kate traced the line of his jaw. She felt a contentment she had never dreamed was possible. "How did you know where I would go."

"I didn't at first," he answered. "I had a detective get on the CB airwaves and ask truckers if they'd seen a woman driving a white vintage Jaguar with Massachusetts plates. It didn't take long for someone to report seeing you."

"I'm so glad you found me," she murmured.

"Because I have such a wonderfully equipped garage." He frowned teasingly.

Her expression suddenly became serious as she looked hard into the soft brown depths of his eyes. "Because I love you."

"It's about time you said that, lady," he growled, his arms closing around her possessively.

The ringing of the phone woke them the next morning.

"I knew I should have waited a few days before I had that thing installed," Tyler groaned as Kate rolled out of his arms and picked up the receiver.

After a few minutes of a conversation that had been monosyllabic on her end, Kate said, "I'll speak to him." Then after adding goodbye, she hung up.

"You'll talk to whom about what?" Tyler asked, kissing her shoulder and turning her to face him.

"To you about returning to Langston Industries," she answered, her expression serious. "That was your father and he wants you back. He says he's willing to agree to any terms, within reason, that you might want. He says he doesn't want to find himself in competition with you in the marketplace."

"He can't have me back," Tyler stated. "I won't do anything that could mean risking losing you."

"You can't lose me now," she assured him, adding playfully, "Where else could I find a husband with such a well-equipped garage?"

Laughing, he drew her into his arms.





**SUZANNE
CAREY**

**A Most Convenient
Marriage**



It was one thing to marry a man who intended to keep his heart out of the bedroom—quite another to fall in love with him....


It was a late March day in St. James's Park. Looking at the lake with its flocks of ducks and the crowd of nannies pushing prams along its banks, Rachel Vanden Ross was reminded of a Maurice Prendergast painting in New York City's Metropolitan Museum.

She, Prendergast and the Metropolitan were American. The park, with its nannies and rosy-cheeked babies, on the other hand, was British. Surrounding it on all sides was London. She'd fallen in love with the city as a girl of ten when she'd accompanied her father on one of his crusades. Now, as a working resident for most of the three months that had passed since her husband's funeral, she felt free for the first time since childhood. After twenty-nine years, the real Rachel had finally emerged.

A check for two hundred and fifty pounds was tucked safely inside her wallet. It represented her first art sale, a study of working-class waifs in London's impoverished East End. She'd taken an extralong lunch hour to pick it up, and she'd experienced a distinct thrill of pleasure when Ian Trewitt, the gallery owner, had placed it in her hand.

Why then, she asked herself, did the nannies and their charges make

her feel something akin to sadness? She'd long since come to terms with her childless state. It couldn't be allowed to matter that her heart went out to every sweet-faced toddler.

Closing her sketchbook, Rachel relinquished her bench to catch a red double-decker bus back to Fleet Street. She worked as a commercial artist at Elite Ltd., an international credit-banking firm that controlled a luxury-hotel chain and one of Europe's fastest-growing airlines.

The bus was crowded with salesgirls, office clerks and eccentric-looking elderly types who carried umbrellas and wore hand-knit sweaters under their rain gear.

Walking the half block from her bus stop in the heart of London's publishing district, she slowed her pace as she recognized the tall dark-haired man getting out of a limousine in front of Elite Ltd.'s imposing plate-glass entrance.

Marcus Davenport, Elite's attractive CEO. Rachel had seen him around the offices of his multi-million-dollar conglomerate. The broad-shouldered tycoon was one of the best-looking men she'd ever seen.

For a moment he appeared to glance in her direction. Then he was leaning back into the car. Ra-

chel caught sight of his companion's smooth blond hair and aristocratic profile.

Averting her eyes, Rachel found herself facing a wrinkled dame in shabby black who was hawking nosegays. Digging out the price of a bunch of daffodils, she turned back toward the building.

Marcus Davenport was stepping away from the curb. "See you later," a husky female voice called after him.

"Not tonight," he said in a casual tone. "Business, you know."

I wonder if they had lunch, or something more intimate, Rachel thought as she followed Davenport into the building.

The nosegay of daffodils, so impulsively purchased, made a bright spot of color above Rachel's worktable that afternoon. She focused on the ad she was creating for Air Anglia. It would feature a woman reclining in an open-weave hammock, one tanned, shapely leg spilled over the edge as the woman stirred sugary Jamaican sand with her toes.

"Mrs. Vanden Ross?" An unfamiliar voice broke her concentration.

Rachel looked up, frowning slightly. A thin, brown-haired man with a hawk nose and glasses was standing beside her worktable.

The man extended his hand. "I'm Alan Travers, Mr. Davenport's assistant. Mr. Davenport would like a word with you."

She regarded him with something approaching alarm. "I'm not being fired, am I?" she asked.

"Good heavens, no." Alan Travers's smile widened. "Perhaps we'd better let Mr. Davenport explain."

Despite her resolve to stay calm, an uneasy sensation settled in the pit of her stomach as they passed through the executive foyer. Opening one of the tall paneled doors to Davenport's private office, Alan Travers motioned for her to precede him.

The tall dark-haired man who'd claimed her attention so effortlessly a few hours before got to his feet, walking around the desk to meet her. Her sensation was one of drowning in blue eyes that were the deep rich shade of a storm at sea. She found herself focusing on details—his sooty-black lashes, the way his brows slanted upward toward the bridge of his nose.

"Thank you, Alan," he said.

She barely noted Alan Travers's departure. No wonder the tabloids labeled Davenport "England's most eligible catch," she thought, taking in his powerful build, firmly chiseled features and generous, uneven mouth. Not a chink of vulnerability was showing. Here's a man, she decided, who guards his innermost thoughts. A man who doesn't lightly bestow his affection. His blond friend in the limousine is in for some heartaches. In fact, he'd be quite a challenge for anyone....

Suddenly aware of the direction her thoughts were taking, Rachel tethered herself on a short leash.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Davenport," she said crisply.

"Please," he said. "Call me Marcus."

Rachel allowed him to settle her on a luxurious sofa.

"You're the girl I saw on the street, aren't you?" he asked, catching her off guard. "The one with the daffodils?"

Rachel couldn't hide her surprise. "That's not why you asked me here, is it?" she said. "Noticing me on the street, I mean."

For the first time, Marcus Davenport really smiled, and she was struck by the boyish air it gave his face. "Actually, no," he admitted. "At the time, I didn't realize—" Breaking off, he regarded her for a moment. "You've been with us nearly three months now," he said. "You're a widow. And childless. The only child of world-renowned evangelist Luther Vanden."

Rachel stared. "Right so far."

He leaned back a little. "Actually," he said, "you used to sing on Dr. Vanden's television programs. You traveled abroad with him, too, serving as his press secretary and booking agent. Of course, you were less active in that regard after you married...the man of his choice, I might add, cable television executive and political conservative Desmond Ross. I imagine that's because Ross required your

services in his bid for the U.S. House of Representatives—"

"It was the Senate." She corrected him almost absently. Is he going to describe my life in detail? she wondered. Explain how Des suffered a fatal heart attack in the arms of his last mistress? Or compliment me on how well I bore up through the funeral?

"Tell me how it was, living in your father's shadow," he suggested. "I'm curious what life was like for you, especially after your mother died."

"Lonely." The single word was out before she could stop it. "I was expected to take her place...live up to Dad's standards—"

"They weren't yours?"

She shrugged. "Not always. Sometimes I just went through the motions, played whatever part he wanted, while my real self escaped in imagination. You see, I had other plans for my life—"

"Like being an artist?"

No doubt he knew about her affiliation with Trewitt Galleries, as well. "Yes," she admitted. "Art was always my dream. That and getting married, raising a family."

A half-hidden spark leapt into his eyes at that. Abruptly she looked down at her hands. "Surely you didn't invite me to your office to discuss my girlhood fantasies."

"In a way, I did."

There was a small silence, and Rachel felt he was about to explain what was on his mind. A moment later he appeared to think better of it.

As if he were seeking temporary relief from some hidden stress, Marcus Davenport lit a cigarette. "The fact is, I may have a business proposal for you," he said. "I thought we might explore the possibility over dinner tonight. About seven?"

Rachel's eyes widened. Though it made no sense whatsoever, apparently she was the "business" that had prompted him to refuse his gorgeous blonde.

"Will Mirabelle be all right?"

Quite casually he named one of the city's most chic and expensive restaurants. Standing, he squeezed her hand. She had the strong impression of being drawn into something so absorbing, so all-consuming that it would alter the very fabric of her life.

MIRABELLE'S MAÎTRE D' ushered them immediately to a secluded table screened by blooming hibiscus and potted palms. Marcus issued his instructions without giving the printed menu selections more than a cursory glance.

"I must say you look quite lovely tonight," he said. "With your hair arranged that way, you remind me of the first photograph I ever saw of you."

Rachel's delicate winged brows arched slightly as she waited for him to elaborate.

"I was in the States on business last December when the *New York Times* carried an account of your husband's funeral," he said. "In the picture that accompanied the

story, you were standing at the graveside with your father and Ross's two grown sons. Ross's ex-wife was there, too. I remember thinking how poised and self-contained you seemed."

Rachel dismissed the compliment with a shrug. "Actually, I was numb," she admitted. "I won't pretend I enjoyed the notoriety or the public disgrace that accompanied my husband's death."

Marcus nodded. "My ex-wife was unfaithful to me. I know how it feels. Mind telling me why you and Ross didn't have any children?"

"On the supposition you plan to justify this third degree," she said. "It had nothing to do with Des's, well, 'indiscretions.' He'd undergone an operation before our marriage, you see, and he wasn't able to father any more children. He didn't favor adoption. He already had his sons and they, apparently, were enough for him."

Marcus regarded her intently. "But were they enough for you?" he asked.

The query penetrated her innermost defenses. "It's no secret that I want a baby of my own."

With a gleam of what might have been secret satisfaction, Marcus changed the subject. They discussed her art and its portrayal of disadvantaged children, and then he moved on to his career. Their conversation didn't flag throughout the meal.

She was surprised when he lit an after-dinner cigarette and returned to the far more volatile topic of his personal life.

"I mentioned before that my ex-wife was unfaithful," he said, carefully noting her reaction. "But I didn't tell you the whole story. We had a son. Jamie was three when we divorced. I was granted custody. Because of Deirdre's infidelity after Jamie's birth, she didn't get the handsome court settlement she'd expected. I suppose that's why she enlisted her latest lover's aid in faking a kidnapping scheme."

Rachel tried to contain her astonishment.

"During their attempt to return him without getting caught," Marcus added, "Jamie was struck by a car. He died soon after, in the hospital."

Rachel reached impulsively for his hand. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I know that doesn't help. My God... to have a child and then to lose him that way! It must be the worst thing that can happen to anyone in this world."

Marcus didn't answer. Yet for a moment he didn't shrug off her touch.

"Enough about my private sorrows," he said. For a moment he studied her. "Last month I celebrated my thirty-eighth birthday. I've managed to build up what most people would consider a substantial enterprise. At one time I expected my son, Jamie, to inherit

it. But his death canceled those hopes."

Rachel frowned. "You can marry again."

"Like you, I was burned and I'm disinclined to remarry, as well. Yet I, too, want a child. If I am to be a father again, marriage seems the best option. That's why I asked Alan to evaluate various women for me, with the object of finding the best possible mother for my baby."

"Bu... but that's barbarous!" she exclaimed.

Calmly he knocked the ash from his cigarette. "It seems to me the truly barbaric way of going about it would be to leave things to chance."

"You can't have it both ways," she reminded him. "A moment ago you said you were disinclined to marry."

"And so I am. I consider matrimony in the conventional sense, where romance and love are supposed to play a part, out of the question. I don't intend to put myself in a woman's hands to that extent again."

"Then I don't see how—"

"It's quite simple, really. My wife must agree to make no demands on my affection. Of course," he hastened to add, "the child will be conceived in the usual fashion. But once the deed is done the next Mrs. Davenport won't be required to grant me any further bedroom privileges."

"You're joking!" To Rachel, the kind of marriage he was de-

scribing was no marriage at all. Despite her own unhappy experience, she considered matrimony a tender, sacred partnership. His callous relegation of it to business-deal status shocked her to the core.

"I shall require a prenuptial agreement assigning custody to me in the event of a divorce. Also, my wife must agree to end our marriage amicably if, after two years, she hasn't conceived. In that event, of course, she'd be handsomely compensated."

She struggled for words. "What you're contemplating is sheer madness," she told him, her voice sharp. "Marriages of convenience went out with the nineteenth century."

Marcus remained unperturbed. "In Europe weddings of convenience, to consolidate wealth or power, take place every day. And I daresay quite a few of your countrymen marry for the very same reasons."

To her consternation she had to concede the point. Though she'd believed in love when Des had courted her with flowers and candle-lit dinners, she'd discovered to her sorrow that political advantage, not reciprocal feelings, had figured most prominently in his plans.

"I can't believe you mean any of this," she responded. "In a minute you're going to admit this is all a joke and reveal your true purpose in asking me out tonight."

But Marcus wasn't joking.

"Problems like my need for an heir vis-à-vis my aversion to getting emotionally involved with someone require bold, sometimes unconventional solutions," he answered. "It should come as no surprise that you're Alan's top candidate. And I must admit that, since meeting you, I concur. That's why, under the conditions I've outlined and pending further discussions to make certain we'd be compatible in raising a child, I'm asking you to marry me."

"I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing!" Rachel sprang to her feet, nearly upsetting her half-empty glass of sherry. "My God! We hadn't even *met* before today, and you expect to hire me as your child's mother, sow a baby in me as if I were...were...some kind of field! I'd appreciate it," she added severely, "if you'd call me a cab."

"Hold on half a moment." Coming around the table, Marcus caught her lightly by the wrist. "I fully understand your reaction," he whispered, standing so close the maître d' must have thought he was witnessing a lovers' quarrel. "In fact, I was expecting it. I know what I'm suggesting might seem outrageous at first blush—"

Rachel freed herself as inconspicuously as possible. "Try humiliating," she snapped. "I feel cheap."

"Please don't." Clearly Marcus regretted having upset her. "I swear I have the highest respect for you, Rachel, or I wouldn't have made you the offer I did. Please,"

he said, "walk with me along the river while I try to put things in better perspective. I won't keep you long."

She couldn't say afterward why she agreed to accompany him. Maybe it was just plain curiosity. Whatever her reasons, Rachel found herself keeping pace with Marcus a few minutes later as they turned onto the mist-wreathed promenade of Victoria Embankment.

"In a sense, I suppose, I was hoping you'd welcome my proposal," Marcus said, linking her arm through his as their footsteps echoed on the granite paving stones. "You love children and want one of your own. If you accept my offer, you can have it both ways. No emotional entanglements, no pain. Just a baby to hold in your arms. Plus the kind of financial security that will allow you to help others—like the children in your paintings."

He paused as if silently willing her to see things from his point of view. In response Rachel huddled deeper inside her raincoat. She had to admit that she'd wished more than once that she had the means to support the Bowes Center, the day-care center for low-income families she'd visited several times near Spitalfields Market.

Big Ben struck the hour. Somewhere a foghorn boomed mournfully.

"I forgot to add," said Marcus in a low voice, "that while one child would fulfill our contract, I

wouldn't object to another at some future date. Though we're both 'only children,' as the saying goes, it's good to have siblings, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do," Rachel replied reluctantly.

He didn't press her further, and they resumed their walk past Hungerford Footbridge.

Softly she addressed him. "It's getting late...."

He nodded, taking her hands so tentatively that she didn't pull away. "I have to go to Paris tomorrow," he said. "I shall be gone for several days. I know you aren't disposed to accept my offer. But dare I ask you to consider it anyway while I'm gone? I've already excused you from work until Friday on special assignment."

On the verge of saying no, Rachel hesitated. She didn't like the high-handed way he'd arranged for her to take a leave of absence, any more than she cared for his proposed marital arrangement. A voice inside her had other ideas. It was urging her not to turn him down—yet.

"I doubt it'll make any difference," Rachel said at last. "But I suppose I could think things over."

Even in that murky light, his pleasure was unmistakable. "Since I've made you a bona fide proposal of marriage," he murmured, "perhaps I might be forgiven for kissing you goodnight."

A moment later his mouth descended on hers. His tongue parted

her lips to probe moist and tender places.

For Rachel, it was as if the earth had tilted. She staggered a little in his arms. White-hot shafts of longing pierced her to the quick, igniting a need so compelling she'd never experienced anything like it—not even during the halcyon days of her courtship with Des. A primal emptiness raged at the center of her being.

Tears shone against her lashes as he drew back to look at her. She realized that, though the experience had been a shattering one for her, he probably didn't have a similar reaction.

She couldn't possibly know how affected Marcus really was. A master at hiding his softer emotions, he gave no hint except to crook one brow in homage.

When she reached the sanctuary of her flat, she leaned heavily against the wall.

I can't believe I'm giving his scheme the time of day, she thought, let alone serious consideration.

FOR THE NEXT several days, Marcus and his unorthodox proposal were never very far from Rachel's mind. Part of her—the conservative, old-fashioned part—urged flinging it back in his face. The primitive female in her counseled otherwise. Marcus's tall frame and those enigmatic eyes just wouldn't stay out of her thoughts.

You could be getting yourself into a whole lot of trouble, Rachel

cautioned herself. Yet she was overcome by a sense of fatalism. For the present, she wouldn't turn down Marcus's proposal even though she wouldn't quite accept it, either. She decided they should get to know each other first.

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MARCUS BEAMED when she gave him the news. "I agree. We need to spend considerable time in each other's company before making any permanent commitment. This weekend presents the perfect opportunity. I've been asked to a house party in Oxfordshire. We'll leave tonight."

Taken aback, she said, "I'm not sure your friends would appreciate a last-minute guest," she said.

"Nonsense, of course they would."

Rachel shrugged. She was imagining the sort of house Marcus's friends probably owned. No doubt there'd be a stable full of horses, a Rolls-Royce or two in the driveway. "I hate to sound like a spoilsport," she told him at last. "But I literally have nothing to wear for that kind of occasion."

"Not to worry," he assured her, energetically pressing a button on his desk console. A woman appeared.

"Rachel Vanden Ross, meet Enid Billingsham," Marcus said. "Enid, I'd like you to go shopping with Rachel this afternoon. She needs a few things for a weekend in the country. And, as a recent arrival in London, she hasn't had

time to familiarize herself with the best shops. Make sure you charge everything to my account."

"Now see here—" Rachel's tone was adamant. "I really can't accept."

Marcus shook his head. "Of course you can. I can well afford it. Besides, if things don't work out, you can post the whole lot back to me special delivery."

What followed was an afternoon Rachel would never forget. They began at Harrods. Unfamiliar with the huge upper-crust emporium, Rachel stared at its soaring, brilliantly lit arcade and glittering aisles of merchandise. The bewildering selection of whisper-soft lacy underthings and nightclothes Enid picked out for her nearly proved to be Rachel's undoing.

From Harrods they traveled to Beauchamp Place and the Bruce Oldfield designer salon where, with Enid Billingsham's encouragement, Rachel selected a pair of dinner dresses.

Next they visited a Sloane Street jeweler where the secretary convinced her Marcus would be extremely disappointed if she didn't choose a lustrous midlength string of pearls.

Subsequent forays included brief stops at a specialty boutique for riding hat, crop and beautifully tailored trousers, and a shop next door to Prince Charles's shirt-maker for several exquisitely made ladies' shirts, a tan turtleneck and

a winter-white cashmere pullover with matching slacks.

Next came a whirlwind visit to a beauty salon, where the pink-coated attendant talked Rachel into allowing her hair to be sheared to a fluffy length that just skimmed her shoulders. The woman also applied glossy nail polish and makeup with a practiced hand.

Certain they'd finished their shopping spree, Rachel was a bit surprised when they halted before a small exclusive furrier's.

"This is *definitely* too much," Rachel proclaimed. "I have no intention of charging a fur coat to Mr. Davenport's account!"

Enid Billingsham shrugged. "Well, we don't have to buy anything."

Inside the fur salon, the secretary coaxed Rachel into putting on her new black party dress and spike heels before trying on any of the jackets. Mrs. Billingsham excused herself to make a phone call.

Stunned by her new image and lost in imagining what Marcus would say if he could see her, Rachel continued to pirouette before the three-way mirror in a glamorous succession of minks, foxes and sables.

"Well, sir? What do you think?"

The words were Enid Billingsham's, and Rachel—swathed that moment in richly glowing Russian sable—turned around. She found herself pinned beneath Marcus's deep blue gaze.

He raked his gaze from the tips of her suede pumps past slender ankles and shapely calves to the delicate line of her chin as it nestled against glistening sable. With a little shake of his head, he crossed the space between them. She caught her breath as his fingers sank into lush, yielding fur to fasten on her shoulders.

Rachel let her hands rest against the roughly textured tweed of his jacket. "I want you to know I was just trying these on for fun."

Marcus cut her off with typical decisiveness. "You shall have one, of course. The little number you're wearing, if it meets with your approval. I know it does with mine."

He was looking at her as if she were something good to eat and he was "slimming," as the British called dieting. She had the distinct feeling he liked what he saw but was somehow displeased by his own reaction.

She wasn't quite sure how to answer him. Her moment's hesitation sealed the jacket's fate. He instructed a clerk to charge it to his account.

AS THEY entered the westbound motorway and picked up speed, Marcus appeared to concentrate solely on his driving. After they passed the spires and turrets of Oxford, Marcus switched to more leisurely country roads. As if he suddenly remembered her presence, he began to engage her in conversation.

"I realize it may be something of a tall order," he acknowledged with a boyish grin. "But I'd like to hear about your philosophy of raising children."

Haltingly at first, because his question focused on the somewhat sensitive *raison d'être* of their relationship, Rachel tried to put her feelings into words. She explained that she considered unconditional love the best tonic—expressed frequently with hugs, milk and cookies and a genuine interest in the most trivial details of a child's daily existence.

"Of course, it's important to instill values," she told him. "Set standards. Let them know there will be unpleasant consequences if they overstep their boundaries. But love's the basic thing. They should be able to feel there's always someone who believes in them and thinks they're truly special."

"I couldn't agree with you more," Marcus replied after a moment. "That's what I lacked as a boy. Loving arms to run to. The feeling that it mattered to someone if I was chosen for the rugby team or won a spelling match."

Unwilling to interrupt what she suspected was an unaccustomed confidence, Rachel waited.

"My parents died when I was young," he added, throwing her an enigmatic look. "I was raised by a great-aunt, whose tidy, circumscribed life was thoroughly disarranged by an active eight-year-old. In her own way she loved me, I suppose. She just didn't know how

to show it." He shook his head. "She died the year I finished at Cambridge."

Just then they rounded a bend in the road. Through a break in the trees, Rachel glimpsed a red brick manor house.

"There's the Nevilles' place now," Marcus said.

The country seat of Pandora and Whitney Neville outstripped even Rachel's expectations. A classic example of Georgian design, the three-story mansion boasted a large central structure flanked by two matching wings.

For Rachel, entering the Neville mansion was like stepping into another world. *I suppose I knew people lived this way*, she thought. *I just never expected to be a part of it.* During the introductions, she had the strong feeling she was accepted simply because she was with Marcus.

"I do believe you're the first person I've ever met who's connected to an American evangelist," remarked a cool blonde, whom Pan had introduced as Cynthia Aston-Jones. "I'm dying to hear all about your experiences."

"There's really very little to tell," Rachel answered in a low voice.

Mercifully Pan Neville was an alert and considerate hostess. She introduced an array of conversational gambits, and with the focus shifted away from her, Rachel was free to sip her mulled wine and study her surroundings. Since

much of the talk centered around social events and the latest theater offerings in London, she had very little to contribute.

Dinner in the formal dining room was a full-dress affair watched over by a collection of ancestral portraits. Rachel chose her low-cut copper silk. She was rewarded with a definite gleam of physical interest when Marcus knocked at her door to escort her downstairs.

As they were descending one side of the mansion's curving symmetrical staircase, he asked if she'd mind playing an affectionate role with him. "It might help pave the way for a future marriage announcement," he explained with a rakish grin.

During the five-course meal and afterward when they returned to the drawing room for brandy and amateur theatricals, Marcus was as attentive as any woman could wish.

If she'd been asked in advance, Rachel would have guessed Marcus was something of a night owl. To her amazement, he stifled a yawn and murmured something about turning in.

Not about to be left behind in the company of strangers, Rachel promptly added that she was tired, as well. Innocent of the impression she created, she linked her arm with his and accompanied him upstairs.

"Well done." Marcus applauded as they reached the south bedroom wing. "The rumor mill

downstairs will have us cozily ensconced in bed together."

They had halted outside her door, and Rachel raised her face to his in astonishment.

Kissing her with the same controlled passion that had so disarmed her on the riverbank, Marcus drove every rational thought from her mind. Beneath her copper silk bodice, her nipples hardened into telltale nuggets as he crushed her against his chest.

I want him more than life, more than anything, Rachel realized, her heart hammering beneath her breasts. *I, who didn't plan on getting involved with a man again. I can't believe this is happening.*

Keenly aware of her reaction and his own body's swift response to it, Marcus drew back to search her face. A moment later he released her. "Sleep well, Rachel," he said, sending her crashing without a hint of what it cost him. "I wish you pleasant dreams."

THE NEXT morning she couldn't help noticing how handsome Marcus looked in his snowy-white shirt, tan trousers and black riding boots. A groom had brought out several horses for their inspection.

Rachel could see that the Nevilles' Thoroughbreds were among the finest; there wasn't a loser in the lot. Still, she couldn't suppress a twinge of disappointment when the groom suggested a docile-looking bay instead of the spirited chestnut filly that had caught her eye.

Guessing at her emotions, Marcus took hold of the filly's reins. "What about this sprightly miss?" he asked. "Think you can handle her?"

Rachel beamed, captivated that he'd taken the trouble to discern her wishes. "I'd certainly like to try," she said. "She reminds me of a horse I rode at home."

Marcus helped her into the saddle. Moments later he was astride his own selection, one of their hosts' prize stallions. The huge animal reared slightly as they clattered out of the stable yard.

They cantered across the park beneath the trees. The day was fresh and fair, without even a hint of rain. Rachel exchanged a look of pure delight with Marcus as they splashed across a stony creek bed.

Oh, she thought, caught up in the exhilaration of the moment. Just to be alive and riding out in the English countryside with Marcus beside me. It's like a dream.

Crossing several more fields, they approached an arched stone bridge. Beside it, a hip-roofed cottage was half-hidden among the trees.

"What a charming spot!" Rachel exclaimed.

Beyond a cricket field at the edge of the village, the road rose to meet the higher elevation of Minister Lovell Hall. It stood starkly against a blue sky, and the crumbling remains of its ruined tower seemed to brood about long-past days.

They turned their horses loose in a green, grassy courtyard and walked about the site, enjoying the fresh air.

Rachel made herself comfortable on a warm stone. Marcus appeared more relaxed than she'd ever seen him before, and he stretched out on the grass at her feet.

Rachel couldn't help thinking what a handsome man he was. She wanted to smooth back the thick hair that fell over his forehead. His eyes seemed able to gaze into her very soul.

She was startled when he reached for her hand. "Wouldn't you say that Minster Lovell Hall's a better setting for a marriage proposal than a restaurant?" he asked her after a moment.

She could detect no hint of teasing in his dark blue eyes.

"Yes, I suppose it is," she answered, wondering what would follow.

"Then, perhaps I'd better ask you again."

He didn't actually go that far. Giving her hand a squeeze, he let it go and changed the subject. Soon afterward, he suggested they should be getting back and offered to help her remount.

Rachel felt extraordinarily close to him as they returned to the Neville estate.

I'm falling in love with him, she thought in amazement as he smiled brilliantly at her and quickened their pace.

Remembering the emotional deprivation of his childhood and the loss of his son, not to mention the treachery of that son's mother, Rachel's heart went out to him. She couldn't imagine how Deirdre Davenport could have wanted anyone but him.

"Please," she whispered to the powers greater than herself. "If it's possible, let Marcus learn to love me back a little. Otherwise I think my heart will break."

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RACHEL SAT quietly in the passenger seat the following afternoon as they returned to London. She stole a glance at Marcus's firmly sculpted profile. Watching him and remembering the strong sense of connectedness she'd felt between them at Minster Lovell Hall, Rachel wondered if she'd been imagining things.

Marcus turned to her abruptly as if she'd spoken. "Maybe I'm premature in asking," he said in his deep, faintly rough voice. "But we've had a chance this weekend to get better acquainted. Have you given any more thought to my proposal?"

She didn't answer him for a moment, but there wasn't any use pretending—not even to herself. In her heart, she knew it was too late already to tell him no.

"Actually, I've decided to accept," she said, giving him a shy look.

"But that's wonderful!" The Jaguar swerved a little as he reached over to squeeze her hand.

He suggested they honeymoon in Brittany after undergoing a civil service in two weeks' time. He owned a farm there, situated in the Bigouden area of the Cornouaille coast. It was the *environment* of his mother's childhood:

He went on to warn her that the whitewashed stone cottage there was primitive and isolated, though it had the advantage of being near an unspoiled beach. If the atmosphere proved too quiet for her, they could always drive to Pointe du Raz or ride into one of the local villages. He knew a neighbor who could provide them with horses.

Surprised and delighted that he would suggest such a romantic setting, Rachel quickly gave her approval. She had a hunch mystical Brittany would go a long way toward explaining her soon-to-be husband's moody Celtic streak.

MARCUS'S LEGAL representative was a thin, balding man who peered incuriously at Rachel through gold-rimmed half spectacles. He showed no emotion as he handed each of them a copy of the marriage contract. Maybe to him this is an accepted way of doing business, Rachel thought as her pen scratched across the final page of each copy. He probably doesn't realize his ironclad phrases could bar any possibility of love and trust.

Marcus begged off dinner when they arrived back at her flat. Looking genuinely weary, he reminded her they'd be spending the next few weeks together. Meantime he needed to get some sleep.

"I'll pick you up about nine-thirty tomorrow morning. We'll drive over to the registry together."

She nodded. They regarded each other for a moment without speaking.

"Perhaps you'd like to come up for a glass of sherry," she suggested finally. "You needn't stay long. But we really do have something to celebrate."

To her pleasant surprise, Marcus agreed readily. "I should have thought to bring champagne."

Rachel's new diamond reflected tiny pinpoints of light as she poured out the drinks.

"To happiness," he said promptly. "And the success of all our plans."

They clinked their glasses. Sipping at her sherry, Rachel listened quietly while Marcus talked of his latest business accomplishments and his intention of flying them to Brittany himself in the company plane.

Nothing prepared her for the suddenness with which he stood and drained his glass—or for the way he pulled her to her feet. With a groan he claimed her mouth, bruising it with the sudden ferocity of his kisses. In response she seemed to melt into him.

Her sweet submission was like a match to tinder. A moment later his hand was beneath her blouse, pushing aside her bra and closing possessively over one lush and yielding breast.

Desperate with arousal and inflamed by his readiness, Rachel dug her fingers into his shoulders. With every shred of her being, she longed to give him what he wanted: the complete surrender that was her own dearest wish.

To her acute distress, long-held principles got in the way. "Please..." she begged, pushing lightly against him. "We can't do this, Marcus. It isn't right." He didn't know she was fighting a perilous battle against herself.

THEY WED at a registry late the following morning, with the magistrate's wife and son serving as witnesses. Rachel emerged with her new husband to be swarmed by Britain's sensationalist press.

By midafternoon, headlines touted the union of a wealthy British financier and ladies' man with Luther Vanden's daughter. Office Romance, one tabloid screamed. Marcus swore roundly at another, which hinted Rachel had been having an affair with him even before her late husband's death.

On their arrival at Marcus's elegant nineteenth-century town house, the butler informed them that "Mrs. Davenport's father is on the phone."

Picking up the receiver, Rachel listened quietly for several min-

utes, letting her father's ire run its course. His accusations that Marcus was a reprobate, and that she'd embarrassed Des's family by marrying again so quickly didn't faze her. She wasn't surprised when, after several minutes, her father's objections took on a more narrow focus: the fact that she'd be remaining in England now, not coming back home to North Carolina to help with his crusades.

Politely but firmly she told her father to butt out of her affairs.

"Whether or not I married Marcus, Dad," she said, "I had no intention of coming back to the States. Or, for that matter, of working with you again. This is something I want, and I hope you'll get used to it. Maybe even get around to wishing us happiness." Adding a polite goodbye, she hung up the phone.

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RACHEL CAUGHT her breath at the stark beauty of Marcus's cottage in Brittany. Flanked by twin chimneys and huddled beneath a steep roof of blue-gray slate, the rectangular whitewashed stone dwelling was set high enough to have a view of the water.

"Marcus; it's wonderful!" she exclaimed.

Her rhapsodizing drew a quick smile from the dark-haired man beside her. "Better take a closer look before deciding whether or not you like it," he advised. "The place isn't blessed with modern

conveniences. You might find it a bit too rugged for your taste."

Someone, she saw, had been there before them, throwing the windows open to the mild salt air and sweeping the flagstone floors until they were spotless. Cold meat, cheese, cider, a crock of butter and a round crusty loaf of bread reposed on a table next to the stone fireplace.

They put their things away in the tiny, breeze-swept bedroom. Inevitably their eyes met over its most striking furnishing, a giant four-poster with freshly tucked linen sheets.

Marcus peeled off his jacket and tie. "You might want to put on something more comfortable," he suggested, nodding at her arrow-slim skirt and delicate high heels. "After supper I thought we might take a walk."

She joined him in the kitchen several minutes later. She got out plates. The bread, cheese and cider were delicious, but neither she nor Marcus seemed to have much appetite.

"Come on," he told her, getting to his feet. "We can leave these things until later. The sunset won't last."

They walked to a low promontory overlooking the water. The moisture-laden air was exhilarating and almost electrically charged. The hiss and boom of the surf drummed in her ears like a heartbeat.

Afterward she couldn't have said how long they stood. Her past

seemed to dangle by a thread as the sun slowly sank below the horizon.

Finally most of the light had gone. As if they were lovers of long-standing, Marcus slipped an arm about her waist.

"It's been a long day," he remarked softly. "Perhaps we should turn in for the night."

ONCE IN THEIR bedroom, the trusting way her bare arms twined about his neck made him want to protect her with his life.

"Can you have any idea how much I've wanted you?" he asked, his rough voice catching on the words. "I've thought of little else but covering you with my body. Kissing you until your skin's on fire with it. *Sowing life in you*, as you once so vividly suggested."

The erotic confession tumbled the last barriers in her mind. Primitive female response soared uppermost. "Take me, then," she urged, offering herself without reservation. "I promise I won't hold anything back."

He set her down gently on the edge of the four-poster. Her eyes widened as he ran his hands lightly over her body, learning its shape.

"You're so lovely," he whispered.

Crying out with pleasure as he kissed her knees and her thighs, Rachel meshed her fingers in his dark hair. Words failed her as he buried his face against her stomach, reaching up to plunder her breasts. Sharp flickers of need sped

through her. She cupped her breasts to offer them like ripe fruit.

Moments later she was moaning as his mouth closed over one rosy peak. Eagerly she enfolded him, stroking the broad muscles of his back, then daring to reach lower for the long, lean curve of his hips and buttocks.

He smoothed one hand down the flat curve of her stomach to part her thighs. Then and only then, as he awakened her to quivering life, did she begin to guess what it was to be a woman.

Closing her eyes, she let the feeling take her, bearing her up and up into realms of delight that had no boundaries, whole kingdoms of bliss inhabited only by his touch. From moment to moment her ravenous response threatened to sweep her past the outer limits of experience, beyond every barrier she'd ever known.

Suddenly she broke free, cries of astonishment escaping her as release came in little shudders; its heat permeated her like a rush of flame. Gradually a delicious ache settled in her thighs, making them feel heavy, languid. She relaxed then, her hips sinking back to the bed.

I never knew it could be this way, she thought, holding fast to him. Never dreamed it, not in my wildest imagination.

Cradling her, stroking her, Marcus was similarly overcome. It's her first time, he realized in amazement. *No one but me has ever done this for her.* The thought

was enough to return him to aching readiness. Repeating her name as if it were a talisman, he fitted himself to her body.

The very fullness of him now was enough to reawaken her need. Marcus's face was a mask of wanting in the darkened room as he slowly began to move. Instinctively she followed, falling into a complementary rhythm that was as natural as breathing.

This time she reached her summit just seconds before he did, drowned in huge waves of pleasure that rocked her to the soles of her feet. In that moment, Rachel's sense of connectedness to Marcus was overwhelming.

For what seemed an eternity, they didn't stir, electing to lie there with their bodies all tangled together.

"Are you happy?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes, happy," she whispered. "I've never...gone wild that way before, during lovemaking."

"I did guess that," he admitted.

"You don't mind? About my inexperience, I mean?"

In response he uttered a little oath. "Oh, Rachel," he exclaimed. "I feel privileged, sweetheart. In a way, you came to me untouched."

Spontaneously offered, the endearment was like a boon. Eagerly Rachel hugged it to her heart as they drifted into sleep.

SHE FELT BEREFT when she awoke many hours later in a stream of

sunlight to find him gone from their bed. A little knot of uneasiness formed in her stomach when she spotted her new husband's solitary figure seated on a big flat rock, his dark brows knit together in a frown as he stared pensively out to sea.

But despite her uncertainty and Marcus's habit of distancing himself after intimate contact, the next few days proved to be a lyrical time for both of them. Freed of the nervousness that had lain between them on their wedding night, they made love again that afternoon in a pasture full of wildflowers. Never had Rachel guessed desire could be so thoroughly satisfied yet revived within minutes—even more powerfully than before.

The realization was confirmed that night as she and Marcus came together again in even more passion. The next day found them deep in each other's embrace after jumping into a hayloft together.

As the week lengthened, her love for Marcus grew, though no words of caring were exchanged between them. For her part, Rachel didn't dare to speak about what she felt. She hoped the language of touch would suffice. She offered him caresses that were like love poems, explicit and passionate epics of what was in her heart.

The day they set off on borrowed horses for a nearby village fair near the end of their first week together promised to be another pearl on an unbroken string.

Eagerly they joined the crowd lining a narrow cobbled street just as the religious parade started. The standard bearers with their richly emblazoned banners and statues of the saints were followed by bagpipers in beribboned hats.

Pipes were later abandoned for fiddles and accordions, and the villagers began to dance. The local wine flowed freely.

It's as if we were meant to dance together, she thought giddily, as Marcus whirled her about the dusty common under the trees. It's the same when we make love. Though we're just beginning to discover each other, we move like one person.

They were nearly ready to leave the festival later that afternoon, when the weather abruptly changed. Suddenly the air smelled of approaching rain. Looking up, Rachel was surprised to note the sky's ominous slate blue color.

Almost simultaneously Marcus slipped and called her "my love." Instantly he was remote and cold.

"Let's go," he suggested in the kind of tone he might use to address a stranger.

A heavy ache settled near her heart, but she had little time for introspection. Setting a breakneck pace, Marcus made it almost impossible for her to keep up with him. The pounding of her own mare's hooves as they ground up the dirt jarred her half-senseless.

They hit the hard-packed beach that fronted their cottage at a furious clip. Abruptly Marcus

wheeled about, reaching for her horse's reins. Lathered and spent, the animal balked.

"What... what is it?" Rachel cried.

"I want you."

Jumping from the saddle, he was beside her in an instant. A moment later he was dragging her down into his arms, crushing her to him. His free hand was under her skirt, pushing up her petticoat.

Desperately she tried to pull away. "Please, Marcus... not like this!"

Her words had absolutely no effect. He pulled her down with him on the sand so that they lay half in the surf. Fingers that had pushed against him soon relented and furtively began to caress.

Even if she lived to be a hundred, Rachel thought she would never forget the way Marcus took her that day with fierce, almost violent hunger as her tears mixed with the taste of sea salt against her tongue. Afterward she simply collapsed with him, her chest heaving in ragged gulps.

Moments seemed stretched to hours by the time he moved off her. She could only guess how daunted and vulnerable she looked.

At last he spoke.

"If we didn't manage to create life in you that time," he said, his tone biting, "the next couple of years will probably be wasted effort."

Hurtful though it was, Rachel felt the remark was oddly directed against himself.

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BARRICADING herself behind the closed door of their room, Rachel flung her ruined clothing down in a heap and washed her face with water from a large ironstone pitcher.

Emerging some minutes later in slacks and a high-necked sweater, she saw that it was already spitting rain. Marcus was in the dooryard, talking with a neighbor youth who had bicycled over to bring him a telegram.

"I have to fly to Paris tonight and oversee Air Anglia operations there," he said, turning to Rachel with a troubled look. "One of our planes has been hijacked in Cairo. They're demanding the release of several political prisoners being held by the French government."

Shocked at the news, she didn't answer. Our idyll is ending, she thought. And not just in a figurative sense.

She was tempted to stay on at the cottage just to spite him. Still, she was unwilling that they go their separate ways. Instinctively she guessed that if she let him go now, he'd be absent from her life for quite a while.

UPSTAIRS AT Air Anglia operations in Paris, nursing seemingly endless cups of coffee, Rachel looked on and listened for the bet-

ter part of a tense night. Marcus remained in the thick of the action, occasionally speaking over the radio-telephone hookup with Cairo.

Dawn was breaking when they finally got the word: Egyptian police had resolved the crisis, and the entire group of hostages had been released unharmed. A cheer went up in the Air Anglia staging room. Several of the firm's Paris officials and technical personnel gave Marcus hugs of congratulation.

Later, at a little café, Marcus expelled a deep sigh that seemed designed to lift the weight of the world from his shoulders.

"What happened tonight is my particular bad dream," he confided, suddenly willing to bare at least a small part of his soul. "Tonight wasn't Air Anglia's first incident. I'm afraid one day a hijacking will result in someone being killed. Maybe someone I care about."

Rachel frowned.

For a moment his eyes gave away their deepest secrets. "Remember the fake kidnapping attempt I told you about," he asked, "the one that resulted in my son's death? Well, something similar could happen. For real. I'm surprised terrorists haven't tried to extort money from me personally via that route. You could be the target next time. Or the child you may already be carrying. I'm not sure I could live through that kind of hell again."

For the first time, she began to understand how protective he was likely to be of any child they might have.

STILL, SUBTLY at odds with each other, Rachel and Marcus returned to London. As the days became weeks, their prescribed meeting ground seemed limited to two places—the occasional public function she attended as his wife and the passionate intimacy of her bed.

He's *mine*, she would exult as they reached a shattering climax together. But typically Marcus had withdrawn from the emotional contact by the next morning.

He was exceptionally remote for the next several weeks. Shutting herself up in her little studio on the mansion's third floor, Rachel painted as if her life depended on it.

Two more paintings sold to Trewitt Galleries for even higher prices than before, and she used the money to help the Bowes Center. But the need there was great, and she realized her earnings weren't enough to bridge the gap.

The center's director, Jocelyn Banks, had told her that as of June first the center would be open just three days a week, unless £120,000 magically appeared from somewhere.

Rachel didn't have the kind of money Mrs. Banks needed unless she tapped her husband's bank account. And that was completely out of the question. Until she pre-

sented Marcus with an heir, she hadn't any right to his money, not even to make a worthy contribution to charity.

Filling out a loan application the next day, though, at the ornate and somewhat stuffy financial institution where Marcus maintained his personal account, Rachel was amazed at the effortlessness of things. After a brief call from the bank to Trewitt's to confirm her association with them, she walked out with the entire sum she'd requested.

Rachel suspected that her loan application had been approved partly on the strength of her relationship to Marcus, and that the call to Trewitt's had been merely a courtesy to set her at ease.

ONE MORNING after they'd been married a little more than two and a half months, she felt queasy from the moment she got out of bed.

I'm pregnant! she thought. I'm going to have Marcus's baby!

Yet, overjoyed as she was, she couldn't ignore her sudden fear. *What if Marcus turns from me when I tell him?* she asked herself. *Will he still want to sleep with me now that his deepest wish has been fulfilled?*

Her visit to the doctor's office that afternoon was surprisingly brief. After a quick but thorough examination, the physician confirmed her speculation.

Driving home, Rachel realized she would have to tell Marcus right away. That night at dinner,

though, Marcus seemed preoccupied.

"I ran into a banker friend of mine at a board meeting this afternoon," he remarked finally, giving her an odd look.

"Oh?" Rachel replied.

Apparently the banker had twitted Marcus about his wife seeking a loan. "With all your millions, old boy, it's not cricket to be stingy with the little lady," he'd said.

Rachel felt her cheeks grow red hot.

By now Marcus was on his feet. "What I don't understand is why?" he said.

Softly Rachel confessed that the loan was for the children's center.

"Why didn't you ask me for the money?" he demanded.

Rachel heard only his anger. She didn't catch the softening in his tone or realize he might view her failure to rely on him as a form of personal rejection.

"I didn't have the right...then," she blurted out. "Now that I've earned it, I wouldn't hesitate."

"Earned it?" he asked, his frown deepening.

Words tumbled out of Rachel in a rush. "By producing the heir you wanted," she said, her tone sharper than she'd intended. "That's right, Marcus. For nearly two months now, I've been carrying your child!"

Marcus's face lit up, and he grasped her by the wrists.

Involuntarily Rachel shrank back from him. His joy is all for the success of the scheme, she

thought miserably. *Now that I'm pregnant, he won't want me anymore.*

Her instinctive withdrawal cut Marcus to the quick. His expression darkened. "So your part of the bargain is finished, and now you don't have to put up with my attentions, is that it?"

Suddenly realizing what was going through his mind, Rachel was horror-struck. "No, Marcus," she protested. "Please...you don't understand!"

"*I think I do.*"

Not giving her a chance to answer, Marcus left the room.

*

HE LEFT for New York the next morning, and several weeks passed without either a phone call or a telegram.

Ironically she heard about her husband through Jocelyn Banks. Rachel was met with effusive gratitude over a handsome gift he'd made to the children's center.

"Thanks to him, curtailed services and make-do facilities are a thing of the past for us," Mrs. Banks said. "Though Mr. Davenport has never set foot in our facility, he's committed a small fortune to its development. Clearly he loves you very much."

I wish you were right, Rachel thought sadly.

Time seemed to drag to Rachel. She tried to keep abreast of Marcus's travels through Alan Travers, following her husband in imagination as he moved restlessly

from New York to his Paris office and back again, with several trips to the Orient sandwiched in between.

It didn't surprise her when they made the gossip columns again—this time with hints that their marriage was on the rocks. A photo in one of the tabloids pictured Marcus with a slender, sophisticated-looking blonde at a Singapore polo club. To Rachel's chagrin, it was captioned, *Eligible Once Again?*

RACHEL WAS four months pregnant and feeling quite lonely when Alan Travers simply showed up at her door late one morning and persuaded her to go out to lunch. He'd been worried when he couldn't reach her by phone, and his company proved to be just the tonic she needed.

As the weeks passed and Marcus still didn't return, she and Alan began regularly lunching together. Gradually they became fast friends.

I don't know what I'd do without him, Rachel thought. But though she'd built a life of sorts for herself, she continued to long for Marcus's love. And one day, without warning, he returned. She was standing barefoot before her studio worktable, clad in maternity jeans and an old shirt, when she looked up to find him watching her from the doorway.

"Marcus!" she exclaimed.

He looked incredibly weary. Yet to Rachel he was still the best-looking man in the world.

How she longed to run to him! Still, she stifled the impulse as he appraised her changed physical state. *Will he still find me attractive?* she wondered.

"I must say pregnancy agrees with you, Rachel," he commented. "Almost six months along and feeling wonderfully well, if Alan is to be believed."

Is he just going to stand there looking at me that way? she wondered. Why doesn't he take me in his arms?

Somehow she managed to keep her composure as she inquired about his travels. *If he wants me, then he can tell me so.*

The days passed. Several times she imagined he'd like something more intimate from her than companionship, but he made no move in that direction. They went off each night to their separate rooms.

Finally, after she'd given up hope that desire would flare between them again, she was stepping out of her private shower one evening when he walked into her room. Embarrassed and quite conscious of her condition, she hastily covered herself with a towel.

Crossing the space between them, he set the towel firmly aside.

"That's my baby, too, Rachel," he said, his voice rough-edged with emotion. "I want to feel it...while it's still in your body."

More gently than she'd have thought possible, he placed one hand on her stomach. Just then the

baby kicked as if it recognized its father's touch.

"Do you really mind my seeing you this way?" he asked, his voice a whisper.

Swallowing, she nodded.

"But why?" he persisted. "To me, your body is beautiful."

Her tears slipped out of control at that. "How *can* it be when I'm so big and you—I mean we—don't love each other?"

Slowly Marcus shook his head. "Ah, Rachel," he confessed, betraying a wealth of feeling he kept largely hidden even from himself. "Don't you know I adore you this way?"

The towel lay pooled like a fallen toga about her feet.

"Let me love you," he begged, reverently caressing her breasts and the opulent curve of her stomach.

"Oh, Marcus!" Rachel hid her face against his shoulder.

"Tell me it's all right," he insisted. "I won't take you against your will."

Sweeping her up into his arms the way he had on their wedding night, he settled her with extravagant care against the piled-up pillows on her bed.

Tightly her arms clung about his neck. "I want you, Marcus," she admitted.

With a little groan, he freed himself and took off his things. As she lay there looking up at him, Rachel thought he must be the most beautiful man in all the world.

Only the most elemental thoughts possessed her as her husband came to lie beside her and lead her into love.

His kisses were like wine—warm, deep, deliberately intoxicating. Then he moved to her breasts and his mouth tugged with great tenderness yet overwhelming hunger. Cradling his dark head against her, Rachel imagined their child exacting the same privilege.

Careful of her comfort, he entered her as they lay curled on their sides. A hot glow spread in great, compelling ripples through her body. Their union seemed intimately connected to the rhythms of the universe.

FOR A LONG time after they lay there, fitted together with the curve of his body sheltering hers.

"I haven't hurt you, have I?" he whispered, resting his palm lightly against her stomach.

"Oh, no." Turning to face him, Rachel kissed his mouth. "If you could only realize what this has meant."

"I know what it's meant to me," he said.

"Stay with me. Stay...." she pleaded, suddenly insecure as she burrowed against him. "Tell me that when I wake up tomorrow, I won't find you gone."

In response he drew her more closely into his arms. "I'm sorry, Rachel," he said, the note of regret very clear in his voice. "But that's what I came to your room to talk about. In the morning, I have

to fly out of the country again. I've a mountain of work to do if I'm to return to London before our baby's birth."

Still, Rachel didn't speak, though she muffled all protest. Tonight he was hers—at least until she fell asleep.

THIS TIME, Marcus called her every week or so to inquire about her welfare.

"How are you, Rachel?" Marcus always asked, his voice sounding as if it came from somewhere beneath the sea, though she knew it was probably being relayed by satellite. "And the baby?"

Marcus was putting her first. A glow would settle in the region of her heart, and she'd send an unspoken message winging to her unborn child—*It's Daddy calling!*—even as she answered him.

*

MISSING MARCUS and restless in her very pregnant state, she was shopping for baby things with Alan.

Sorting through tiny, beautifully made garments at one of the Mayfair area's finest baby shops, Rachel whispered lovingly to her unborn child.

"You can't fool me, Jonathan," she said. "I know you're a boy."

Alan teased with the easy familiarity that lay between them. "I say, who were you speaking to just then?"

"Jonathan," she answered with a laugh, gratefully handing him her packages. "That's what Marcus and I have decided to call the baby if it's a boy. And I'm absolutely certain that'll be the case."

"Well, well... I thought we might try Fortnum and Mason today," Alan suggested. "I'll admit I skipped lunch in anticipation of their trifle."

At Fortnum and Mason's mezzanine tearoom, Rachel and Alan shared a marble-topped corner table. Her array of packages from the children's shop reposed on a separate butterfly-patterned metal chair.

True to his word, Alan ordered a trifle, though Rachel turned up her nose at its monstrous calorie count.

"I don't want to look like a beach ball when Marcus gets back," she laughed.

On their way out, they paused under Fortnum and Mason's famous clock so Alan could buy her a nosegay. Their hands innocently brushed as he presented her with a bouquet of bachelor's buttons. Just then, out of the corner of her eye, Rachel saw Marcus.

Forgetting all else, Rachel ran to him. "Marcus!" she exclaimed. "Darling, why didn't you phone?"

Coldly he looked from her to Alan and back again. "Hello, Rachel," he said at last. "I need to speak with Alan."

Before she fully understood what was happening, he was ushering her into the Daimler and pil-

ing up her packages on the front seat.

"Marcus," she pleaded, rolling down the passenger window. "You've only just returned. Can't your meeting with Alan wait?"

"I'm afraid not," he answered. "I'll join you tonight at dinner. That is, if you're available."

At a curt nod from his employer, the chauffeur pulled out into the stream of traffic.

THAT EVENING Marcus was aloof and hostile.

"We have to talk," Rachel insisted. "You must realize I'd have waited for you here at home if you'd given me any kind of warning."

It was an unfortunate choice of words.

"I shouldn't think a *warning* would be needed," he responded. "At least not where a faithful wife is concerned."

"Alan and I are friends and that's all," she countered, her tone suggesting he was a fool to think otherwise. "With you gone for months on end, his companionship has meant a lot."

Marcus regarded her through narrowed eyes. "Alan has flown to New York this evening in my place," he announced. "Meanwhile, I'm back to stay until after the baby's birth. You'll have to derive whatever comfort you can from that."

"I'm eight months pregnant, for God's sake," she reminded him. "What man in his right mind

would find me attractive in this state?"

"I know one who would," he said.

Upset by the tumult of their argument, Rachel mistook his meaning. "If you mean Alan," she shot back heatedly, "you're wrong! He'd never breach a trust. As for your doubts about *me*, don't forget we have a bargain. You've certainly seen fit to take advantage of that!"

"Have I really?" Marcus's voice took on a dangerous edge, but he didn't defend himself when Rachel flashed back that even she, despite the sheltered life she led, sometimes read the scandal sheets.

The conversation ended as she went directly up to her room.

*

THE LUMINOUS dial of Rachel's bedside clock read a quarter past two when she awoke clutching at the bed covers. The pain struck again, stronger this time. Seconds later a whoosh of clear fluid slipped down her legs.

Panicking, she stumbled into Marcus's room. "I think the baby's about to come!"

Leaning against him, Rachel let the next spasm take her, accommodating her breathing to it and remaining absolutely still until it had passed.

She made it down the stairs with Marcus's assistance before another pain struck. Each time one hit, she felt lifted out of herself. It was as if a majestic elemental

process had claimed her body. Her function was simply to catch the rhythm and cooperate.

When the pain eased, Marcus helped her into the car. "It's going to be all right," he promised.

It seemed only a few minutes before they were screeching to a halt outside the hospital's emergency entrance. Blinking in the harsh light, Rachel refused to let go of Marcus.

THAT NIGHT, as he wiped beads of sweat from Rachel's forehead and encouraged her to dig her nails into his arm, Marcus was the ideal husband.

Every muscle in his body tensing, Marcus watched her push the slippery red boy-child out into the world. For a moment the baby gasped, traumatized by his journey through the birth canal. Then, as great gulps of air entered his lungs, he set up a tremendous wail.

"Jonathan," Rachel whispered, her body going limp as the doctor held the baby up for them to see. "I knew all along it was you."

Marcus was wiping away tears. "Ah, sweetheart, he's so beautiful," he said, choking on the words. "I love him already."

"I know," she answered softly. She was thinking how much she loved them both.

A FEW DAYS later they were home again. After Rachel had finished nursing Jonathan and begun to prepare for bed, Marcus knocked

lightly and entered the room. "I want to ask you a favor," he said.

Holding her hairbrush in abeyance, she gave him a questioning look.

"I'd like to sleep here with you," he said. "In your bed."

At her look of surprise, he hastened to explain. "I just want to feel our baby near. Listen to his breathing and little whimpering sounds."

Rachel's heart went out to her dark-haired husband. He's afraid something will happen to Jonathan the way it did to Jamie, she realized.

"All right," she conceded, wielding her brush with renewed vigor. "But I warn you you're not likely to get very much rest."

Going to sleep with Marcus beside her yet not touching her in the act of love was easier than she'd expected.

Shortly after midnight she awoke to nurse Jonathan. To Rachel's amazement, she and Marcus had nestled in each other's arms. Nevertheless she wasn't surprised to reawaken later and find him gone.

Several weeks went by and Marcus continued to share her bed, though he scrupulously avoided any hint of physical contact.

Though he worked long hours, he didn't mention going out of town again. He seemed determined to remain in London, watching his son grow and change.

Jonathan was nearly a month old when Rachel received an unexpected invitation.

"I got a telegram today from Joanna McBride, a cousin on my mother's side," she informed Marcus that night at the dinner table. "She was one of my few close friends during high school. She and several of her women friends will be vacationing at Menton in the south of France next week. Joanna wants me to join them for a few days."

Marcus greeted the news with a frown. "I don't see how you can do that, with Jonathan nursing. Is this trip worth weaning him to a bottle when you'll be gone just a few days?"

"I have no intention of weaning our baby."

"Then, I don't see how . . ." he began.

Something about the set of Rachel's mouth warned Marcus he had a battle on his hands. "I expect to go *and* to take him with me," she said. "Despite what you may think, I have no intention of trying to escape either you or our custody arrangement."

He frowned, genuinely surprised at that. "Is that what you think is worrying me?" he asked. "Well, you're wrong. I know you're far too honorable to renege on our bargain. No, it's a different sort of kidnapping I'm afraid of." Marcus gave way with extreme reluctance. "I won't oppose your plan," he said, "provided you take

Jonathan's bodyguard with you and stay for just a few days."

"I think that could be arranged." Stunned at her victory, she tried not to show her surprise.

"Of course you'll use the company plane," he added, taking charge of details as if he hadn't just lost the argument. "I'll meet you in Paris on your way home."

She felt positively mercenary as she looked forward to lazy hours, caring for her child and soaking up some winter sun. Toiling away in London's fog and damp, Marcus was sure to miss them.

On the return flight she thought things over. One thing was certain: she loved Marcus very much. While her stay in Menton had provided much-needed relief from the tensions of physical proximity and emotional distance, she would soon be back in the middle of that situation. Rachel knew she couldn't bear the standoff between them to continue week after week.

There's only one thing to do, she decided. Though I may get a humiliating rejection, I must tell him how I feel and offer to have him on any terms.

Rachel found herself dozing during the uneventful flight. It was after they were well into their descent to Paris that there was a jolting thud, as if something had smashed into the airplane. Its starboard engine began to vibrate wildly, sending strong tremors through the cabin.

"Jonathan!" she cried.

"Mon Dieu, ce sont des oiseaux!" the pilot exclaimed over the open intercom. My God, it's birds! Rachel translated as the plane veered alarmingly to port. From the window Rachel could see the port engine had been hit, too. It was starting to smoke.

"Prepare for emergency landing!" the pilot shouted in English, switching back to French as he radioed the Roissy tower for crash equipment to meet them on the runway.

WITH A shuddering impact, the plane hit the runway. For what seemed an eternity they hurtled forward, careening wildly as the pilot tried to halt them. Rachel could hear fire trucks screaming alongside as they approached the barricade.

Before she realized what was happening, Jonathan's bodyguard was hauling her to an erect position. Blood was streaming from a cut above his eye. "Quick," he urged. "We've got to get off in case she burns."

The bodyguard was able to open a hatch and help them scramble down a hastily positioned emergency ladder. Half running, half limping, he dragged them away from the burning plane as the pilot hit the ground running, motioning frantically for them to get clear. Somehow Rachel managed the flight in her high-heeled pumps without breaking an ankle or pitching forward with Jonathan in her arms.

A Jeep screeched to a halt on the tarmac, followed by an ambulance. There was the sound of running feet.

Seconds later Marcus enfolded them. She could feel the wild beating of his heart, sense the surge of relief that coursed through his body. In that moment, she knew they were flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, herself as much as Jonathan. Marcus and Rachel drew back to look at each other.

"It wasn't kidnappers or terrorists, after all. It was birds," she whispered, amazed that they were all right, and stunned by the irony of the situation.

Shaking his head, Marcus drew her close. As if on cue, Jonathan, who'd slept through most of the terrifying experience, started to cry.

Marcus went over to clasp the bodyguard's hand. His voice breaking, he thanked the man from the bottom of his heart.

Al Munson gave him a lopsided grin. "Just take good care of the missus and her little 'un until I get out of hospital."

Together they waited until he was put safely on board an ambulance. "C'mon," Marcus told Rachel. "I'm taking you home."

He slipped one arm around her. "I thought I'd lost you and our son," he said, the rough note back in his voice. "It would have killed me if I had, you know," he added, his beautiful eyes suddenly a window to his tangled emotions. "We have to talk, Rachel...as soon as

we get home and put our son to bed."

BY THE TIME they reached Marcus's elegant Paris apartment, Rachel felt strongly that they were a family in a very real sense.

Tucking Jonathan into his crib, she kissed him good-night.

Someone had kindled a fire in the study hearth. Marcus, who had been on the phone, put down the receiver when she entered. What a beautiful man he is, she thought.

She met Marcus's eyes. "We could have lost everything today," she whispered.

Somberly he nodded. "We're very lucky, my love. We have our son...and, if you want it, another chance to build something very special together."

He had called her his love. Though she could hardly believe it, there was something dangerously close to love in his deep blue eyes.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she told him.

Marcus's voice was husky with emotion. "If you're willing, I'd like to renegotiate our agreement," he said. "I know it wasn't part of the bargain, but I love you more than life. I've behaved like a fool...given you absolutely no reason to return my affection. All I ask now is that you reconsider letting me be your husband in every sense of the word."

Overcome with emotion, Rachel couldn't answer him, though she covered his hand with hers.

"I'd already decided, you know," he added, "even before your plane got in trouble, that this was what I wanted. Hell, I should have realized long ago that I didn't want anybody but you."

"Marcus," she began, almost tongue-tied as she tried to respond. "If only—"

"Don't answer yet," he said, panicking a little. "There's one more thing I have to tell you. I want you to know the truth about that photograph of me in Singapore. None of it signified anything: Amanda Beale is the daughter of one of my business colleagues. As for the rumors, that's all they've been. There hasn't been anyone but you in my life, dearest Rachel, since I first made love to you."

In the very depth of her being, she knew she could believe him. Yet she felt greedy now, strong enough to demand everything he had to give.

"If you mean that, Marcus," she said gently, causing him to hold his breath, "then there's something I want you to promise me."

His brows lifted a little. "Anything, sweetheart."

"What I want is a very simple thing—always to find you beside me when morning comes."

For a moment, he didn't comprehend the significance of what she was asking. Then a smile broke over his features. "Is that all?" he asked joyfully.

Her own blue eyes gleaming at him from beneath long dark

lashes, Rachel nodded. "Maybe it doesn't seem like much," she admitted, "but it means the earth to me. Haven't you guessed, my darling Marcus, how much I love you, too?"

In answer, his mouth covered hers. Like a man who has been starving and is suddenly presented with a banquet, he ran his hands over her body, glorying in its shape.

Shivers of pleasure coursed through her, opening the place inside her heart that had been his since they'd come together the first time in his giant four-poster bed.

"Oh, yes...yes...yes," she prodded. "Please...make love to me, Marcus. I've wanted you so!"

He drew back to look at her. "Are you sure it's all right?" he asked.

Knowing how much he wanted her, Rachel feathered his mouth with blunt little kisses. "It's all right, my darling."

Oh, she was thinking, just to feel him this way again! I must be the happiest woman in the world.

THEIR COUPLING was like an explosion. The conflagration that had been avoided on the runway that afternoon blazed up between them, fusing their bodies with the white heat of longing, then freeing them with the release they craved.

Later, holding him, Rachel felt as if she'd burned to ashes. Yet she was a phoenix, too, rising up as if she could float above the world.

Marcus shook his head at his "damnably fine luck."

"With my bloody research and cracked-brain plan to get an heir, I could have saddled myself with anyone," he said. "Instead, I was fortunate enough to find you. I plan to show my appreciation by making certain we're not separated again."

"And when you must travel?" Rachel asked lazily from the shelter of his arms.

"I'll take you with me," he replied. "You *and* our precious baby."

"Perhaps for a while," she responded. "But—difficult as it is to

believe now—Jonathan will grow up someday, to wear Band-Aids on his knees and go off to nursery school. And there'll be other children...."

Shrugging, Marcus nibbled at her ear. From the perspective he had gained that afternoon, nothing would prove difficult.

"When that time comes," he promised, "I'll rearrange my business affairs. Never doubt that I mean to keep you close beside me, Rachel. You're going to find this man in your bed every morning after the sun is up, for the rest of our long and happy life together."





**KATE
DENTON**
Winner Take All



Gail didn't want to be thrust on anyone, least of all Brad. She wanted to be romanced, to be loved, not bargained for like some piece of rental property.

“**N**o, Sam. I won’t do it. *No way.* The man’s nothing but a spoiled, wealthy playboy.”

“Come on, Gail.” Sam plucked up a pipe and began scraping the remnants of the bowl into the ashtray. “Brad Harrison’s in the race of his life for the Senate. You know how to run a campaign office—how to get someone organized.”

“Organization is one of Harrison’s minor problems. Image is the major one.” She walked over to the front of Sam’s desk. “People don’t want a party-animal for their senator. I have no intention of playing baby-sitter to an overgrown teenager with runaway hormones.” She leaned onto Sam’s desk. “This time, Senator Wisterwood, you’re not going to get your way.”

“Do I ever?” Sam tapped his pipe.

“You know you do. But not this time. As I told you—”

“Not now,” Sam interrupted. He put up a hand to stop any more words. “I’m due for a roll call, then I’ve got to study that speech you’re writing. Just keep thinking about what I said. By the way, I want you to attend a reception with me tonight. A reception for Brad. Melva’ll give you the details.” Sam smoothed his sparse gray hairs and

adjusted his tie. “Gotta go. Pick you up at eight.”

“Okay, run out,” Gail called after him, “but my mind’s made up.”

The door slamming behind him was Sam’s response.

SAM AND GAIL were ushered inside to a large marbled hall where a receiving line awaited them. Gail recognized Congressman Harrison immediately. The handsome blonde was nodding as he greeted guests. He wore a black tuxedo, and as with all politicians, a trained smile was in place, accompanied by a two-handed handshake. But this man had embellished his act with eye signals. Was Gail imagining it, or was he sending each woman a private message?

Gail and Sam approached the receiving line. “Hello, Judith,” Sam greeted the woman standing on Brad’s left. “Gail Meredith, our hostess, Judith DeWitt.”

The woman turned to face Gail, looking her over quickly and then gave her an odd smile. Gail wasn’t sure what the woman meant by it, but she did sense that she felt Gail represented no competition. Small wonder. Gail’s feelings of inadequacy were intensified as Brad turned. “Hey, Sam, I’m glad you

could make it." Then his eyes and smile focused on Gail. "And is every beautiful woman in Washington here tonight?" he said as his hands wrapped around Gail's, squeezing it warmly.

She knew he probably greeted everyone he met with the same sort of affection, yet when she raised her face up to his and locked stares with those caressing blue eyes, all resistance faded.

"Brad, this is Gail Meredith."

He surveyed her almost seductively, and Gail pulled her hand away.

He squeezed her elbow as he adroitly moved her along. "Now why don't you join the others and enjoy some of Judith's special punch? We'll talk later."

Sam put a hand gently on her back as they passed into the living room. They each got a cup of bourbon punch and as Sam chatted with various guests, Gail placed herself against a wall where she could unobtrusively get a second view of Judith and Brad.

She eyed the hostess's long, flowing dress—a black chiffon creation covered by a beaded tunic. The black of her outfit enhanced Judith's dark beauty, her shiny blue-black hair and brilliant onyx eyes. She was devastatingly attractive. Not only that—she was rich, too. Her home was evidence of that. According to Sam, it was only a small part of a healthy divorce settlement Judith had received several years before.

Gail's gaze was drawn to the man beside Judith. The newspaper photographs certainly hadn't done him justice. They had never captured the vibrant blue of his eyes or the golden highlights of his sun-streaked hair. His height—he looked to be about six-foot-four—surprised her. Any woman Gail's height would have to stand on tiptoe even to get the top of her head into a shot with him. Her heart raced involuntarily as those vivid blue eyes met hers head-on again.

"Hiding?" Sam walked up to Gail.

"No, not hiding. Observing. I'm also wondering why you're so anxious to send me off on such an obvious suicide mission. I don't want to spend the next few months working my hindquarters off for that gorgeous lout standing across the room flashing all those teeth."

"You think he's gorgeous?"

"Give the devil his due," Gail admitted.

After all the guests had gone through the receiving line, Judith moved to the center of the large arched doorway and rang a silver bell. "Attention, everyone," she said. "It's time that we heard from our guest of honor, our future United States Senator, Congressman Bradley Harrison."

There was enthusiastic applause as Brad nodded his appreciation. "Thank you all for coming tonight. I'm not going to bore you with a long political speech—" There was light applause and some congenial laughter. "But I want to

stress again the most important issue facing this campaign—environmental protection.

"Most of you know my main opponent—Merton Ramsey." The crowd let out a few boos. "As a senator, Ramsey would be in a position to focus on the legislative needs of the conglomerates, as he has advocated in his newspaper. We can't afford to forget that he was president of South Louisiana Oil. The same people who brought us the Gulf of Mexico's largest oil spill. I'm asking you to help me." Brad went on to explain his concerns and the solutions he would bring about.

Surprisingly, Gail found she marveled at his proposals. Maybe he wasn't a windup Washington mannequin, after all.

Gail hadn't really expected another encounter with Congressman Harrison and was surprised to see him making his way across the room toward her and Sam.

"Sorry we haven't had more time to talk," Brad said glancing at his watch. "I feel like a robot the way I've been moving around." He sighed with fatigue as his eyes surveyed the large crowd of supporters.

"Hang in there, my boy," Sam encouraged. "It was a good little speech."

"Was it? Sometimes I wonder. Maybe I should give up on this quixotic effort. Is it worth it?"

"Sure it is," Sam answered. "Just picture Merton Ramsey waving his arms in a signal of vic-

tory. Think of him representing Louisiana in the Senate."

"Over my dead body," Brad responded. "And the way I feel tonight, that's a distinct possibility. Let's face it, I need a miracle."

"Maybe that's what we can deliver," Sam said.

Gail shot daggers at Sam, but he averted his eyes from hers as he clasped Brad on the shoulders. "Gail will talk to you about that in the morning."

"Yes, and the morning will be here soon if we're not careful," Gail said. She turned, heading for the door, leaving Sam to bid Brad a hasty goodbye.

Gail and Sam rode quietly in the taxi until Sam broke the silence. "Gail, one of these days you won't have me around to look out for you. Sure you've got a lot going for you—a master's degree and a Phi Beta Kappa key. But you've got to do more to establish yourself in Washington. I think Brad Harrison is going to be around a long time. He's got that special something. It's not a bad star to hitch your wagon to."

"Hmm." Gail eyed him warily.

"Look," Sam said. "I've arranged for you to meet with him at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Go on over to his office. Talk to him. Once you get to know the guy—know more about what he stands for—you'll feel different."

"I doubt it," she grumbled.

"My Aunt Agnes. You're one exasperating woman. As pig-headed as they come."

"That's the pot calling the kettle black, isn't it, you stubborn old coot?"

"Yes—" he chuckled—"I guess it is," he said as he opened the taxi door to let her out.

GAIL STARED at the sign on the door. Congressman Bradley Harrison III, State of Louisiana. She took a deep breath and turned the knob. "Hello," she greeted the receptionist sitting in the anteroom. "I'm Gail Meredith. I believe Congressman Harrison is expecting me."

The receptionist looked at Gail with surprise. "I'm sorry, Ms. Meredith. I'm afraid the congressman's not in yet."

Gail eyed a sofa against the wall, "I'll just sit over here and wait."

The minutes ticked by slowly. She looked up expectantly as the office door opened. But it was not Brad. It was a younger man, in his late twenties, she guessed. He walked toward her, smiling, his hand extended. "Hi, I'm Dave McElroy. Can I be of assistance?"

His friendly smile and warm Southern accent made her feel at ease. "Glad to meet you," she replied sincerely. "I'm Gail Meredith and I'm here to discuss my working on Congressman Harrison's campaign."

"Oh, really?" Dave seemed surprised. "Well, that's good news. Brad needs all the help he can get this time out. I guess I didn't realize help would come in the form of a woman—a pretty one

at that." He rose from the chair. "I've got some urgent phone calls to make. Maybe I'll see you before you leave."

These Louisiana men seem to scatter compliments around like confetti, Gail thought as he disappeared into an office.

For over an hour Gail sat sipping black coffee. She had half a mind to call Sam and tell him what she thought of this assignment and party loyalty.

She had just begun pacing the floor when the door opened and Brad Harrison entered—dressed in the same black tux he'd worn the night before to the reception.

The familiar smile was missing as he addressed Gail. "Sorry I'm late. I was meeting with some fund-raisers from Louisiana and the meeting lasted longer than I expected."

Fund-raisers, my foot, thought Gail as she shook his hand. More like hell-raising. Why did she let Sam bamboozle her into this?

She followed Brad into his office and took a chair facing his desk. He leaned back, as relaxed as if he were accustomed to wearing a tuxedo in the office all the time. Maybe there had been lots of nights when he didn't go home.

Brad was studying her as he stirred his coffee. "Sam says you're unexcited about the prospect of working for me." His eyes seemed to be flashing in amusement. "But should we come to terms you would be in charge of my campaign in Louisiana. Sam

speaks very highly of your skills." He picked up a thick folder and handed it to her. "This is a voter profile. It'll also give you some demographic information." He shoved the report across the desk to her.

As Gail skimmed the pages, Brad rose from his chair and walked toward the window. She found her eyes following him. He flexed his shoulders. Obviously his late hours were getting the best of him. This was confirmed by a smothered yawn.

"Any questions?" he asked, gesturing toward the report.

"Well...er," Gail stammered. "Not yet." Gail quickly scanned the rest of the report and was surprised by the quality of the work, the detail, the organization. Good staff effort, she thought.

"Now, Ms. Meredith." His mood suddenly became serious. "Tell me about yourself."

Gail wasn't prepared for that. She thought they were to discuss the campaign plans, not Gail Meredith. "Just what would you like to know?"

"The usual. Your background, your qualifications for this position. Did you bring a résumé?" Brad was leaning forward on the desk, arms crossed.

"Um—ah," she stumbled, then suddenly she was angry. What was going on here anyway? "Congressman," she began, her professional poise returning, "my understanding was that Senator Wisterwood was offering my ser-

vices to your campaign for a few months and that we were here to discuss that possibility. I had assumed you were briefed on my background and qualifications. But as a matter of information—" Gail went on to outline her educational and professional credentials.

"But do you have any campaign experience other than for your father and Senator Wisterwood?" he prodded.

"Are you questioning my ability, Congressman? I should think Senator Wisterwood's recommendation satisfactory. But if that isn't the case, and if the credentials I've shared aren't adequate, maybe we shouldn't waste more of your valuable time." Gail stood up to leave.

"I did you a disservice questioning your ability. And Sam, too. Obviously he wouldn't recommend anyone he didn't have complete confidence in." His words sounded sincere.

Gail stood silently, her tongue frozen to the roof of her mouth.

"Well? Will you accept my apology?" Brad offered her his hand.

Gail stared at him, then at his hand as she shook it warily. It covered hers like a huge mitten.

He cleared his throat. "Now that you've forgiven me, will you prove it by coming to work on my campaign?"

"You're putting me on."

"No," he protested. "I'm serious. Dead serious. And I won't take no for an answer."

"Well, I guess I can't fight you and Sam both. When do you want me to start?" she replied, hardly believing her own words.

"Tomorrow afternoon," Brad answered. "Dave will get you oriented and next week the two of you will leave for New Orleans." He touched her shoulder. "Get your seat belt fastened. It's going to be a rough journey," he said.

Gail shook her head. What was she letting herself in for?

*

FIVE DAYS had quickly come and gone yet it seemed only hours ago that she had left Brad's office. But the days had been intense, interesting, and she'd already begun to feel like a member of the Harrison team.

That was Dave's doing. Brad's advance man was a bona fide sweetheart—calm, gentle, patient. Everything his boss was not. Dave had made her feel welcome from the first minute they'd met, and he didn't seem to mind at all having to answer her endless questions.

Her only concern was that Brad made Gail decidedly uncomfortable. His very presence brought butterflies to her stomach. She recalled the few times he'd joined her and Dave in their sessions in Washington. The moment he'd entered the office, her cool efficiency vanished. At times she

wondered if he knew the effect he had on her. She remembered his hand brushing against hers as they perused a campaign brochure... how her pulse had accelerated.

Enough of that, Gail, she instructed herself as she felt Dave watching her. They pulled up to the front gates of a New Orleans glove factory. This was the first stop on the Louisiana campaign trail, which Gail had mapped out for Brad's brief visit to the state. It was 5:55 a.m. and Brad was due to begin shaking hands in five minutes. She and Dave parked the car and took their places in the rain near the gate, placing boxes of cards and buttons nearby to pass out to workers going in.

"He's not here yet," she said to Dave. She was both pleased and troubled. She had devilishly planned this early morning event in order to intimidate the night owl candidate. But what if he didn't make it at all?

But her concern faded as a cab drove up and deposited Brad right at the gate. He was wearing a navy raincoat and carried a big red-and-white umbrella. He glared at Gail, and said half-kiddingly, "The next time you schedule me for six in the morning, you're fired." Just then rain began falling harder. "Did you arrange this weather, too?" he grumbled. "Here," he said, shoving the umbrella into her hand. "Make yourself useful."

She had to stand on tiptoe and stretch her arm its full length to

accommodate the difference in their heights. "Anything for the candidate," Gail replied waspishly.

The employees began to file in through the gates as Brad started working the crowd. Standing beside him with umbrella and arm extended, Gail was able to watch Brad in action. She had to admit his performance was first-rate. He talked with workers as equals, sharing their concerns and explaining how he might be able to help.

The three of them stood in place for two hours until Dave gave Brad an eye signal that it was time to push on. Brad politely eased himself away from the group surrounding him. "Gotta go," he said. "The slave drivers who manage my campaign are telling me it's time to move along." He gave a wave and a broad grin and walked out quickly with Gail and Dave following.

Just as they reached the curb, a shiny black Ferrari screeched to a halt in front of them. "See you tomorrow," he said to Dave and Gail as he climbed into the low-slung car. Gail recognized Judith DeWitt.

"What's she doing here?" she asked Dave.

"New Orleans is Judith's home."

"But I thought Brad was set up to meet with some financial backers." She tried not to sound upset.

"Well, Judith has funneled plenty of money into his cam-

paign. So I guess that makes her a backer. Besides, they're old pals."

"I'll just best they are," Gail grumbled.

"Cynicism isn't becoming." Dave took her arm and linked it through his. "Now how about some breakfast?"

BRAD DIDN'T reappear until late Sunday. Gail was cloistered in a back room of the headquarters rewriting some campaign brochures. The office was empty. She had just highlighted several sentences on a brochure when she heard a floor-board creak. "Well, if it isn't little Miss Busy Bee," Brad drawled lazily, leaning against the doorframe.

Gail's nerves, now unsteady, bristled at his mocking tone. She stood up and glared at him. "Get a lot of work done this weekend?" she finally managed defensively.

"Personal work, I'm afraid," Brad answered, his face registering surprise at her question.

I'll just bet, Gail wanted to say. She recovered her composure quickly enough to smile and say, "Well, great. Now maybe you'll have some time to look after your congressional business when you get back to Washington."

Brad's eyes flashed. "I don't know what you're implying by that," he snapped, "but you listen, and listen good." His voice was low. "It's about time we get something straight." He grabbed her arms, almost lifting her from the floor. "I'm sure you think

you're more suited for presidential duty. But let's just get it clear—I need the support of Sam and his cronies. You came with the deal. But don't push your luck too far! Understand?" His hands gripped her arms tighter, his face only inches from hers.

Gail opened her mouth to protest, then looked up into his stormy eyes. They had darkened to a royal blue. Suddenly, without warning, Gail's thoughts were interrupted by Brad's lips on hers. His kiss was forceful, almost punishing. And, if the truth were known, her resistance was beginning to wane as the kiss continued. Finally, Brad released her and stepped back, an odd expression on his face.

Why was he looking at her that way? Why had he been so mad at her? Politicians usually had skins like rhinoceros hides.

Brad's composure seemed to be returning. She was relieved when he finally spoke. "Look, can we forget that all this ever happened and try to go on about our business?"

Gail nodded. But she knew it would be hard to erase this whole scene from her mind.

WITH DAVE tied up in Washington the following weekend, Gail was in charge of chauffeuring the candidate around. She drove him to a breakfast meeting with a labor group.

"Where to now?" Gail asked as they got back into the car after breakfast. There were no sched-

uled activities. "Want to work a shopping center before lunch?"

Brad shook his head. "No, I really need to take care of some personal matters."

Here it comes, Gail thought, the escape again—probably to the DeWitt mansion.

"Why don't you come with me?"

Gail looked over at him. "Come with you? Where?"

Brad came around to the driver's side. "To see a very special lady." Gail slid over as Brad got behind the wheel. They were soon on the freeway heading in the direction of Baton Rouge.

They came to an arched sign, which read Greenbriar Plantation. Brad drove up to a beautiful old antebellum house. The whiteness of the house was contrasted by black shutters, which ran the length of floor-to-ceiling windows.

Before they could get up the steps to the house, the front door swung open and an elderly woman came out to greet them. She had gray-blue hair and was slightly stooped.

"Bradley, you brought company."

"This is my state campaign manager, Gail Meredith. Now you be nice to her, and no cursing or spitting while we're here."

The woman laughed. "Bradley Harrison! What would you have people think of me?" She looked down at Gail. "Hello, dear. I'm Brad's Aunt Sussy." She shook

Gail's hand. "I'm very glad to have you here."

"Thank you," answered Gail. "Brad told me that he had someone special for me to meet."

"Don't tell her that," said Brad as he came bounding up the steps. "You'll give her a big head." He put an arm around his aunt and gave her a squeeze.

Gail could see the affection between the two. They made their way through a large hallway to the parlor, a high-ceilinged room with gleaming parquet floors.

They chatted for over an hour as they sipped lemonade. Aunt Sussy had obviously been following the campaign every step of the way. Gail took an instinctive liking to the older woman. "Congressman," Gail said, "you should have hired your aunt as campaign manager."

Brad gave an exaggerated snort. "Why, she'd have me in hot water the first week." He winked at Gail.

Without a doubt, Aunt Sussy was loving the ribbing. "You young fool," she shouted back at Brad. "I'm too busy to waste my time politicking for the likes of you. Besides—" she looked straight at Gail "—it looks to me like you're in pretty good hands as it is."

Brad made no response and Gail could feel her cheeks redden at the compliment. She took a final sip of lemonade as Brad announced they had to go.

The three exchanged goodbyes and Brad and Gail made their way

toward the car. "Oh, Gail," called Aunt Sussy, "there's one more thing." Gail went back to the door and Brad's aunt spoke softly into her ear. "Take care of my nephew. He needs a nice woman in his life."

Gail was surprised. She wanted to tell her that if there was anything in this world he needed, it certainly wasn't another woman in his life.

"HAVE YOU SEEN the papers?" It was Dave calling from Washington. Gail looked over at the bedside clock. Five-thirty? She sat upright.

"What's happened?" She was awake now.

"Well, Brad's bought himself a pack of trouble for sure. He and his dinner date ran into her former boyfriend at a restaurant. The boyfriend didn't like Brad's looks and did a little plastic surgery—with his fists. And it's all over the papers."

"Oh, no," Gail moaned.

"Oh, yes," Dave answered, agitated in his voice.

By ten the next morning, Gail, Dave, Brad, Tom and Evelyn, two other campaign assistants, had all come together in Brad's office. At Brad's invitation, Sam had joined them.

"You stepped right into this one. Right now Merton Ramsey's got you just where he wants you—looking like some playboy politician. Meanwhile, Ramsey just sits back acting the mature family man, indignant that the likes of

you would have the nerve to run against him," Sam said.

"What do you suggest I do?" Brad asked cynically. "Perhaps we could have my dear mother separate herself from husband number five—or is it six?—and return home to help with the campaigning. That would present a lovely picture for the voters, wouldn't it?" he snarled. He loosened his tie and slumped back into his chair.

Gail rose, coffee cup in hand. She pointed to a picture of Merton Ramsey and his family. "The congressman simply has to get a wife." She cast a sidelong glance at Brad. "He could probably arrange it with a couple of phone calls and we could be making the announcement within hours."

Gail was surprised to see the group sitting frozen in place. Then Sam banged his fist on the table. "By damn, if Gail hasn't hit the nail right on the head."

"This is no time for jokes," Brad grumbled.

"I'm not kidding," Sam responded. He smiled coyly at each of them. "I think you two ought to get married."

Brad and Gail turned and stared at each other then at Sam.

"No offense, Gail," said Brad, giving her a quick glance as he turned to Sam. "But, Sam, that is the dumbest thing you've ever said."

Sam smiled. "I don't think it's dumb. You need a wife. A wife like Gail to eliminate your playboy im-

age and force your opponents to stick to the issues."

Gail responded quickly. "Brad needs to choose his own wife."

"Well, Congressman," Sam said, "you heard the lady. Do you have another potential bride dangling?"

"No," Brad admitted. "Marriage has not been one of my priorities, you know. Experience hasn't given me much respect for the institution." He stared down at the floor. "Besides, even if I did have someone, I still think marriage is a hell of an extreme campaign gambit."

"Do you have any other ideas for turning this debacle around?" Sam challenged.

"No, dammit." Brad slumped lower in the chair. "If everyone's so damned insistent on this marriage deal, I suppose I ought to consider it. I guess Gail's as good as anyone."

Gail furiously tapped her foot.

"Well, Gail? What do you say?" Sam was watching her intently. "He's a helluva catch—you'll be the envy of half the women in America."

"I don't happen to want to be envied, Sam."

"Nonsense."

Sam went through all the reasons Brad and Gail should wed. Gail watched Brad. He had apparently made up his mind. The tenseness was gone from his face. If anything, he appeared to be inwardly smiling at Gail's distress.

She had to admit the idea of being married to Brad wasn't all bad. In a way it was exciting, scary even. But she didn't want to be thrust on anyone; she wanted to be desired, to be romanced, to be loved, not bargained for like some piece of rental property.

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SAM HAD A lawyer friend in El Paso, a stone's throw from Juárez, who agreed to arrange a quickie ceremony for the couple. There was no waiting period for marriages in Mexico.

A whirlwind courtship and marriage—it should have been a glamorous and exciting experience. Except that it was a sham, an arrangement, a political rather than a love match.

The wedding itself felt almost surrealistic. They'd landed at El Paso, where a waiting limousine whisked them through the darkened night across the border. Gail felt a multifarious mixture of emotions—fatigue, confusion, excitement. Brad was grim and unsmiling. Faint bruises from the encounter which had brought on this hasty marriage were evident around his right eye.

After the ceremony, the couple rode in silence back to El Paso and settled into the bridal suite at a downtown hotel. Brad gallantly took the couch and explained that he still had work to do. Gail took the bedroom, collapsing into bed. But, as tired as she was, sleep wouldn't come. She lay awake lis-

tening to the street sounds of early morning, wondering what she had let herself in for.

The next morning, after a quick breakfast, they were back on the private plane headed toward Louisiana. Casually, he dropped a small box in front of her. "Wear these," he said as Gail opened the delicate velvet case to find two rings, a plain gold wedding band, and a matching engagement ring—a beautiful ruby surrounded by diamond baguettes. She was surprised that Brad had even thought of giving her rings. The man was so unpredictable, she thought.

After they arrived at the airport they rented a car. The drive, a long one, passed in silence. Gail felt tired and disheveled as they stopped the car in the driveway of Brad's country home.

The front door opened and Aunt Sussy flew down the steps toward the car. She hugged her hands to her chest. "I'm so excited for you."

Gail laughed in spite of herself. Aunt Sussy's enthusiasm made the marriage seem almost real.

"I've got the master suite all ready for you. Do you want to go freshen up before lunch?" Aunt Sussy had a twinkle in her eye as though she expected more than freshening up.

Gail began to protest but Brad pulled her toward him, his arm around her waist. They were half-way up the stairs, out of Aunt Sussy's earshot, when Brad stopped. "I don't want her to think

this marriage is anything but real. While we're here, *Mrs. Harrison*, you'll pretend to be the loving and happy bride—okay?" His hand tightened around her waist as he led her into a large bedroom.

Fragrances from fresh-cut flowers permeated the room, which was dominated by a massive four-poster bed covered with a creamy lace spread.

"The bathroom's through there—come down when you're finished." He left the room.

Gail looked around, her eyes drawn to the bed as if by command. Did Brad intend to share that bed with her? How far would he carry this charade?

An hour later, the three were seated at the dining table, Aunt Sussy chattering cheerfully. Gail's nerves had never been so taut. Much to her dismay, Sussy brought out a three-layered wedding cake decorated with tiny spun-sugar doves.

Brad gently closed his hand over Gail's as they cut the cake together. Brad took a small piece and fed it to Gail, surprising her by the traditional action. More of the cake went on her face than in her mouth and he leaned over, nibbling the crumbs off her cheek, much to Aunt Sussy's delight.

He never left her side. He held her hand, kissed her cheek several times and made a thoroughly convincing performance.

When lunch was over, Brad suggested to Aunt Sussy that she show Gail around while he adjourned to

his study to catch up on some paperwork. Aunt Sussy took Gail from room to room, then out the French doors and into the gardens behind the house, chattering happily as she recounted the home's history.

Afterward Gail headed upstairs. Just as her hand clasped the railing of the circular staircase, she heard voices coming from Brad's study and stopped. She knew that voice. She tiptoed toward the study. The door was slightly ajar, and through the crack she could see Judith DeWitt. "But, darling, if you wanted to get married, we could have worked something out." Gail couldn't hear Brad's mumbled response. She rushed up the stairs, tears rolling down her cheeks.

The sun was setting when Brad joined her in their bedroom. He sat down on the love seat.

"I was talking with Aunt Sussy," he said. "We think you need a little time to get adjusted to all this rather than jumping out on the campaign trail with me. Maybe by then the brouhaha in the press will have died down. What do you say?"

"The whole purpose of this farce was to show Brad Harrison as the happily married family man—trot out the little wife and all that. What good can I possibly be, cooling my heels here?"

"I'd rather you stayed here. I need a breather to—to adjust to having a bride."

Gail was skeptical. "To adjust to being married... or to give you time to have a fling with Judith?"

"What's this jealousy bit about Judith? She's like a sister to me. Remember, I married to erase my playboy image. Do you honestly think I'm dumb enough to trade it in on a philandering husband one? No, the name of the game is fidelity—and it'd better damn well be that way for you too!" He crossed the room and slammed the door loudly behind him.

By the time Gail recovered her composure, Brad was already leaving. She was coming down the stairs when she saw him take Judith's arm and walk out the front door. She returned to her room and fell onto the bed. Her anger brought forth the bitter tears and she lay sobbing. It wasn't long before emotional and physical exhaustion finally overtook her.

Gail woke to a tapping on the door. "Come in," she mumbled.

Aunt Sussy set a tray down on a table and came over to the bed. "Gail—oh, dear, have you been crying?" She took Gail's hand in hers. "What did Bradley do? Oh," she paused, "he left with Judith, didn't he?" She looked directly into Gail's eyes, the look confirming her statement.

"They're really just old friends. Bradley's known her for years and if they wanted to marry each other—well, they've had plenty of chances. Remember—he married you..."

"But he didn't," Gail protested. "It's—it's just a setup, to help Brad out politically. He didn't want to marry me." She sat up, wrapping her arms around her knees, and stared down at the floor.

Aunt Sussy reached over and took her chin, lifting her face up. "Gail, Bradley would never marry anyone unless he wanted to. I know him too well. I'd always worried he wouldn't marry at all or that he would—would marry a whirligig like his mother. He was only nine when his mother ran off with another man, one of her many lovers. His father eventually drank himself to death, and I took over care of Bradley. Luckily, we hit it off so well. The only stability he knew was this house and me—and now he has you. Don't give up on him. My nephew needs you, whether he knows it or not."

"That's a laugh," Gail said. "How can I even get his attention with Judith DeWitt chauffeuring him around and purring into his ear all the time. She's so sexy and gorgeous, I feel like a gnome by comparison."

"Now you just stop that talk," admonished Aunt Sussy. "You're every bit as pretty as Judith."

Gail shot Aunt Sussy a wary look.

"I mean it." Aunt Sussy leaned on her elbow to study Gail closely. "With the right clothes and makeup, you could be stunning." She fingered the ponytail Gail had

hastily secured earlier. "And a new hairdo wouldn't hurt either."

Gail looked up at Aunt Sussy skeptically.

"I'll tell you what." She patted Gail's cheek. "You concentrate on the Bradley Harrison campaign and let me be the manager of the Gail Harrison campaign."

THE NEXT WEEK Gail was thrown into a frenzy of activity like she had never before experienced. Even the last days of a hard-fought political campaign couldn't compare with the work Aunt Sussy had cut out for her.

First stop on the agenda was the hairdresser. On Aunt Sussy's orders, Gail's ponytail holder was thrown into the trash can. "I hope never to see that ponytail again," Aunt Sussy twitted as the snipping began. Gail's fine straight hair was trimmed into a shoulder length blunt cut, parted on the side.

Gail's glasses were removed as the makeup artist, Alice, began her work. After a thorough cleansing and moisturizing, Alice began to apply an ivory foundation, blusher and then a light dusting of face powder. Gail's brown eyes were accented with a mocha eye pencil and eye shadow, and dark mascara was applied to her long, thick lashes.

"Amazing," cooed Aunt Sussy.

All Gail could see was a blurry reflection in the mirror; she groped for her glasses. She slipped the frames on and stared. Who was that stranger staring back? The one

with the flawless skin, the high cheekbones and the brown eyes dramatic even through the thick lenses? "Is that me?" she gasped, unable to stifle a smile.

"It's you, dear." Aunt Sussy placed her hands on Gail's shoulders. "And you are beautiful.... However," she frowned as she stepped back to take in the whole image, "what do you think about getting some contact lenses?"

Gail looked up at the makeup artist. "Next week she'll have me in surgery for a nose job," she laughed.

"Oh, no you don't," interrupted the makeup artist. "No one's operating on that gorgeous face."

THE TWO WOMEN were up early the next morning, television tuned in to "America AM." Brad was sitting across from the show's hostess, Agnes O'Malley. He looked as handsome as ever, and perfectly confident.

"Good morning, Congressman. You've certainly set Washington—and Louisiana—abuzz with your recent marriage."

Brad smiled his toothy political smile. "And I thought I was here to discuss issues."

"Oh, no," she flirted. "You're here to be chastised for blowing the cover story of *Newsday* magazine right out of the water." She picked up the copy of *Newsday* with Brad's picture gracing the cover. The caption read: Washington's Most Eligible Bachelor. "By the

time this story hit the newsstands, Congressman, you were married!" Her tone was playful but slightly mocking.

Brad chuckled. "I understand the issue sold well. Perhaps that will help the people at *Newsday* forgive me."

"You have a point," Agnes agreed. "Now, tell us about your new wife."

"Well," Brad crossed his legs and smiled. "Gail has been involved in politics all her life. Her father, Russell Meredith, was a well-respected Oklahoma senator. She's a special woman, very intelligent, and we're very much in love...."

"Humph!" Gail muttered. "If he loses the election, he can fall back on his acting ability."

Aunt Sussy gave her a cross look. "Sssh!"

"Congressman," the interviewer probed, "it must be difficult to be so far apart so soon after your marriage. Mrs. Harrison is in Louisiana, isn't she?"

Brad flashed a grin at the woman sitting next to him. "I promised Gail a little while to rest up." He leaned back in his chair. "After all, the honeymoon was rather tiring." He paused. "When I return to Louisiana—I suppose I'll relent and share her with you. But just a little," he drawled in an exaggerated Southern accent.

Gail's face was red-hot. Never in all her life had she felt so embarrassed. Brad was implying such

nonsense about their marriage on national television.

*

GAIL'S HANDS were trembling. She'd had three days to get used to her new look, but she still could hardly believe the image in the rearview mirror. Even her glasses were gone, replaced by contact lenses. She wondered how Brad would react. He didn't know she was planning to meet him at the airport.

She bit her lower lip nervously as she maneuvered Brad's dark green Porsche into the parking space outside the terminal.

The gate was crowded with people but Gail had no trouble spotting Brad as he stepped through the door. She walked forward tremulously—he seemed to be looking for someone. Oh, no, she thought, what if Judith is meeting him? But then she glimpsed Dave. He spotted her and let out a whistle. At the same time he whispered in Brad's ear.

The next thing Gail knew she was enveloped in Brad's arms. His lips were crushing hers in a passionate kiss. As Brad gently released her, Gail could see a television camera crew approaching.

A television newswoman shoved a microphone toward them. "Congressman, will you introduce us to Mrs. Harrison?"

"Certainly." He smiled, casting his eyes down at Gail. "My wife, Gail." He pulled her even closer.

"No questions tonight, gang," he pleaded. "I'm racing home to be alone with my bride." He squeezed Gail's waist and gave her a big smile.

Brad maintained his hold on Gail until they were outside and headed for the car. Once they were alone he released her. "What have you done to yourself?"

"Oh, a little of this and that."

He stared at her, the scrutiny taking in her whole body. Gail felt a slight shiver at his appraisal. He lifted her by the waist, bringing her mouth level with his. Their lips met in a long, sensual kiss, Gail's arms involuntarily circling Brad's neck.

"Hey, you two," Dave interrupted as he came up, luggage in hand, to join them. "We'd better get out of here while the getting is good."

"Right," Brad agreed, slowly lowering Gail to her feet. "Let's go home and have a look at those informal polls you've been taking. Is the fund-raising really going as badly as you've said?" He and Dave sat in the front of the car talking business, leaving Gail in the back.

Feeling left out, Gail leaned on the backs of their seats, her head jutting between them. "I supervised a couple of those polls myself," she interrupted, "and they were real eye-openers." Before either man could respond, Gail began relating her findings and she continued talking the rest of the drive home.

When they arrived home, Brad asked Dave to join him in the study. He closed the door behind them. Gail impatiently paced the floor outside the study, debating whether to burst in uninvited. No, not this time, she decided.

She poured a glass of iced tea and took it to the bedroom. She began gathering her things to move across the hall to the guest room, then stopped. Why should she move just to accommodate him? She defiantly threw her belongings back into the drawer. "Let him sleep in there!" she barked.

It hurt her to think that she was only a convenience, a plastic throwaway to discard when she'd served her purpose. She realized that the new Gail didn't stand any more of a chance with Brad than the old one. He'd never want her.

It was nearly midnight when Gail was awakened from a fitful sleep by the bedroom door opening and closing. She could see Brad silhouetted against the window as he removed his clothing, could hear his shoes dropping onto the carpet. She lay silently, feigning sleep, as the comforter was pulled back and the bed sank with Brad's weight. For several minutes he was still, then she could feel his lips brush her shoulder gently. As she opened her eyes and turned toward him, he moved his lips to hers, kissing her softly, then more aggressively. His arms were around her and Gail responded to his embrace, the pain of his earlier rejection forgotten in the wake of the

passionate feelings aroused from this unexpected lovemaking.

He pressed his entire length against her, his hard body demanding. Shivers of emotion charged through her body as deft fingers untied the ribbons holding up her gown.

GAIL LAY quietly, listening to his breathing. A mixture of emotions tumbled in her mind—excitement, fear, love and, yes, lust. Being held, being kissed so passionately by Brad only whetted her appetite for more. His every move, his every touch had been electrifying. She reached over to touch his arm, but he seemed almost to pull away and suddenly he rose from the bed. He walked over to a small liquor cart, pouring a generous amount of whiskey into a glass. He set down his drink, grabbed his pants from across a chair and left the room.

Gail had never felt so confused, so miserable.

He had already gone when she awoke the next morning. She paced the floor for a time, then called the campaign headquarters. Dave explained that he and Brad were to meet in the afternoon to devise new strategies for replacing the fast-dwindling campaign coffers. He told her Brad was probably out right now making personal appeals for funds. Gail wasn't convinced. Money was a problem for most politicians, but it seemed the campaign always offered her husband a handy excuse whenever

he chose to escape. And that's what he was doing now—fleeing from her and from their relationship.

*

THERE WAS NO hint of their encounter of the night before; the only thing Gail could detect was a sign of uneasiness in Brad's voice whenever the subject of campaign funds was mentioned. The Harrison camp was still lacking the financial support needed to wage a vigorous fight against Merton Ramsey.

A uniformed doorman opened the door of the limousine that had chauffeured them to the Fairmont Hotel. The official purpose of the function was to honor a retiring member of the Louisiana congressional delegation, but an underlying reason was the chance for Brad to make contacts. The crème de la crème of the Louisiana establishment would be attending the black-tie affair.

As the two climbed from the car, Brad reached for Gail's elbow. He clutched it protectively as they made their way into the hotel lobby. Brad flashed the waiting photographers a mechanical smile. His hand sliding to the small of her back, he propelled her past the glaring lights.

Standing near the door of the ballroom was a huge bear of a man at least six-foot-six and three hundred pounds, whom Gail instantly recognized as Giles LeBeaux, Ca-

jun businessman, self-made millionaire.

"Bonjour, Bradley," he called out, grabbing Brad in a fierce hug. "And who is this gorgeous creature?" Giles released his hold on Brad and reached for Gail's hand.

A fleeting fear of being squeezed to death passed through Gail's mind. But instead of a hug, Giles raised her hand to his lips and offered her a gallant kiss.

"Such a beautiful lady," he murmured. "What did you have to do to get this enchantress to marry you?" Giles placed Gail's hand in the crook of his elbow and led her away to meet the other guests.

Try as she might, Gail could not keep the conversation tuned to the campaign. Giles seemed much more interested in paying her an abundance of outrageous compliments as he twirled her around the dance floor. "I can tell a volcano exploded in my friend Bradley the moment he saw you. Look at him across the room. He is not happy that I am dominating his wife." Gail looked across the ballroom where Brad stood. If he's as jealous as Giles says, thought Gail, he's certainly keeping it well hidden.

Giles was a surprisingly good dancer for someone of his height and girth, and Gail found herself enjoying the attention she was receiving. It was a totally new experience for her.

Gail was flushed as they left the dance floor. Brad walked over to join them. "I believe this is our

dance, darling," he said, pretending to be charming.

Brad pulled her closer, leading her around the dance floor in silence, as she tried to ignore her strong and ever increasing feelings toward him.

Gail was relieved when the music ended and Brad led her over to a refreshment table where Giles was talking to Dave.

"Bradley," Giles slapped him on the back. "You and your lovely lady. Come."

In no time at all a group had sequestered itself in Giles's room. There was Giles, Gail, Brad, Dave, plus a small group of local businessmen. Gail was the only woman in the group, and she was surprised she'd been included. But Giles had insisted.

Giles got straight to the point. He informed Brad he was throwing his support behind the Harrison campaign. He would host a major fund-raiser in New Orleans or Baton Rouge within a month or so. The bargain was sealed with handshakes.

With financial worries relieved, the campaign could proceed in earnest—with a focus on issues and the merits of the candidates. A strategy session ensued as the room filled with smoke from cigars and heat from disagreements over approaches. Finally Giles called a halt to the proceedings. "Enough," he declared in a booming voice, standing up to make his point. "It's time to celebrate. We can argue later."

Brad rose and stood next to Gail, resting his hand on her shoulders and gently massaging her neck with his fingers. The gesture was disturbing. She couldn't escape his grasp, not unless she wanted to cause a scene. What was Brad trying to do to her, anyway?

There were no speeches that evening; on the surface it was purely a social affair. Yet Giles took pains to introduce the Harrisons to all of the guests and Gail felt sure many of them would be contributing to the campaign coffers. She was weary and grateful when the evening finally came to a close.

BRAD RETURNED to Washington. The following few weeks flew by for Gail, even though she missed Brad and longed to hear from him. The only contact she had had with him in the past few weeks was watching him on the evening news.

Gail felt sure she would collapse if she had to endure one more tea party or luncheon. Her feet were swollen from all the standing around in high heels and her head hurt from the forced conversation and constant smiling.

"I know what I need," she said to herself. "I need a break." She checked her datebook—no appointments today. "That settles it. I'm going to play hooky."

Gail was singing in enjoyment hours later as the sleek sports car she drove purred along the interstate headed back toward the plantation.

She had shopped, had a relaxing lunch and picked up a couple of paperbacks. She would be at the plantation in time for the six o'clock news. Her day had been wonderfully relaxing, exactly what she had needed, she thought as she parked the car in the circular drive, pulling her parcels from the seat beside her. Her hand had just touched the doorknob when the door flew open.

"Where the hell have you been?" A scowling Brad confronted her.

She might have known he'd pick this day to return. "New Orleans," she replied casually, walking past him into the house.

"You weren't at campaign headquarters—I know because I've been there all day." His face was flushed.

"No, not at campaign headquarters. Today was a play day." She kicked off her shoes and walked into the den.

Brad was after her in a flash. "I'm not in the mood for games. Who did you spend the day with? It was Dave, wasn't it? I knew he really wasn't going out to see his mother."

Gail coolly moved away from him, enjoying his discomfort. "I haven't seen Dave today. I spent the day with my favorite person—me. Now, if you want a minute-by-minute report, the credit card receipts in my purse can probably provide it." She smiled up at him. He looked perplexed, even sheepish.

She strolled over to the couch and collapsed, propping her feet up. Brad stayed behind the bar, watching her as he poured himself a cola. A few minutes later he had joined her on the couch.

"I understand you've been doing a great job on the campaign."

"Oh?" Gail was surprised at his tone. He sounded almost contrite.

He reached over and trailed a finger down her cheek, a simple yet titillating gesture. Gail longed for him to take her in his arms.

She wanted his lips to touch hers.... She waited, still and silent, as he watched her. Then he spoke, breaking the spell. "I won't be around for the next week or so. I've a whole slew of campaign appearances lined up. But I'd like to ask you a favor."

Brad wanted her to have a dinner party at the plantation. A sit-down dinner for a dozen or so guests, then a larger reception afterward for about a hundred people. He wanted her to tend to the details.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. "The guest list. You can always call Judith if you need help. She's had lots of experience with this sort of thing."

Gail froze. Was he implying she couldn't arrange a simple party?

Gail asked herself for the thousandth time why Brad hadn't married Judith. The only explanation had to be that he thought marriage to a divorced woman might hurt his political image.

BRAD STAYED at the plantation only long enough to discuss the party, then he was off again. Mostly she followed his whereabouts by way of the newspapers and television.

Gail's name came up often in the interviews, and Gail decided Brad was performing a bit too much like the adoring-husband. She'd have to remind him when he came home not to overplay his part.

At five o'clock on the day of the party Gail made a final inspection of the dining room. The mahogany table was already set with Harrison family silver and china. Crystal goblets sat waiting to be filled with the wines Gail had selected. A shining silver candelabra surrounded by an elaborate arrangement of pastel blossoms formed the centerpiece. Brad would have to be impressed.

Gail glanced at her watch. The first guests would be arriving in little more than an hour and still she hadn't heard from Brad. She decided she'd better get dressed so at least one of the Harrisons would be on hand to greet their guests.

She had just removed her clothing and was already entering the bathroom when she saw him. Gail emitted a gasp as she took in Brad reclining in the oval-shaped tub. Her eyes wandered from his toes upward over his body to the big grin on his face. His eyes turned serious as they started their own survey. Gail had forgotten she, too, was nude. She reached for a towel

as his hand snaked out to pull her, sputtering, into the tub with him.

Gail opened her mouth to protest, but was silenced by Brad's lips. He savored the hollows of her mouth, their tongues meeting in warm hunger.

A hard rapping on the bedroom door disturbed them, and Brad pulled away from her, wrapping a towel around his torso.

In a few moments he was back. "Our guests. I'll get dressed quickly—and reluctantly—and join them." He smiled and bent over the tub to kiss the tip of Gail's nose. "Later," he promised.

When Gail returned to the bedroom wrapped in a fluffy bath towel, Brad was already in his tuxedo. "I didn't know what you planned to wear tonight," he told her as he took a long black velvet box from the dresser top. "But I hope these match your outfit."

Gail opened the box and saw a necklace of mixed stones—sapphire, topaz, tourmaline, peridot, garnet, and amethyst set in gold, with matching earrings. She lifted her eyes to meet his. "I don't know what to say. Thank you, Brad."

He kissed her again lightly, then left to join their company. Her head was swimming. Brad was treating her the way she'd always fantasized he would.

She felt like Scarlett O'Hara descending the staircase at Tara that night. Brad was in the foyer with Giles LeBeaux and two other men and they all watched her as she made her entrance, nervously

smoothing the creamy beige taffeta of her ball gown.

It was a gala evening, the guests all laughing, talking and mingling. A society columnist from New Orleans interviewed Gail, and Brad joined her just in time to provide a twosome for the newspaper's photographer.

Giles claimed her for several dances; his wife protesting that she was feeling neglected, but Mrs. LeBeaux said it with a teasing laugh.

Gail was checking the refreshment table when Brad came up behind her, putting his arm around her and kissing her on the neck.

"Dance with me, Mrs. Harrison," he whispered into her ear.

Her senses flamed when he took her in his arms and pressed his body close to hers. She closed her eyes and no longer heard the chatter of their guests, or even the music playing, for Brad was her whole world at that moment. She wished the dance would never stop, that this moment would go on forever.

Their guests departed by midnight, except for the few who were staying over. Brad and Giles were secluded in the study smoking fat cigars when Gail went in to say good-night. Brad's look gave her no doubt he would soon be joining her.

Upstairs, Gail pulled her flimsiest negligee from a hanger. She undressed quietly and then slipped the soft, silver-white negligee over her head and sat at the dressing ta-

ble, brushing her hair until it shone.

But thirty minutes passed and Brad still hadn't joined her. Restless, Gail pulled on her robe and strolled over to the window. There was a full moon shining, illuminating a couple embracing on the driveway. Must be stragglers, Gail thought. She smiled wistfully until she suddenly realized it was Brad with Judith. Tears came to Gail's eyes. Judith was laughing as she got into the car and drove away.

Gail was still standing there when Brad closed the door behind him.

"I shouldn't have kept you waiting so long." He smiled as he removed his bow tie and unbuttoned his shirt.

Gail was muttering as she struggled with the belt of her robe, which was twisted into a knot.

"What's with you?" He moved his arms inside the robe and pressed against her.

"Leave me alone!" Gail demanded. She tried to push him away.

"No. No, I don't plan to leave you alone. Not any longer. And I really don't think you want me to." He stared down at her. Then his eyes lit up. "You saw Judith, didn't you? That little demon jealousy has caused your change of mood." He tightened his grip on her.

"I'm not jealous. Just leave me alone." Her frustration was mounting as she tried to get out of his embrace.

"Hey, that's not good for my ego." He was grinning, obviously relishing the situation.

His casual manner made her even madder. "Get someone else to flatter your ego, if that's what you need. Did you think you could have your wife and lover both?"

Brad pushed her toward the bed causing her to fall backward across it. He dropped on top of her, pinning her body beneath his. "Let's get one thing straight. Do you think I'd risk a Senate seat by carrying on with Judith? Or any other woman, for that matter."

"But what was that kiss all about then?" Gail hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud.

"I would have been happy to tell you if you'd just asked. But frankly, right now, I don't think you deserve an explanation."

His lips crushed hers ferociously. Her robe had parted and she could feel his bare flesh against her chest.

Gail was amazed at how closely anger and passion were intertwined. She wanted him, wanted him desperately. Nothing mattered any longer, not Judith, not the campaign, not tomorrow. Nothing mattered but Brad's sensuous exploration of her, their heated bodies moving together as all reality became submerged in an explosion of love.

“GET UP, woman!” Gail felt a pillow hit her back and she opened her eyes to find Brad standing over her, looking as though he’d been up for hours. Brad yanked the covers back, giving her a good-morning kiss. “We gotta get moving. It’s after twelve and we’re going to Baton Rouge today, remember?”

Gail reluctantly headed toward the bathroom. Brad was right. Today was an important day—the long-awaited fund-raiser being hosted by Giles LeBeaux. Giles had chosen the restored riverboat, the *Mississippi Queen*, as the site of the party.

The brilliant white paddleboat made Gail think of the musical *Showboat*. Twinkling lights outlined three passenger tiers and the square wheelhouse on top. The sound of the calliope beckoned all to come aboard.

As she and Brad boarded, Giles gave them a welcoming hug, wrapping them together in one of his massive bear hugs. He gestured them toward deck chairs where guests sat and sipped mint juleps.

Brad seemed to be in his element. He laughed, joked and greeted each guest intimately with some small detail about their family or business.

Judith DeWitt was one of the last to come aboard. She kissed both Giles and Brad and put her arms around Gail. By her side was

a tall, dark man, with hair even blacker than Judith’s and eyes like midnight.

“Has Brad told you our good news?” Judith bubbled. She held her hand up to Gail and revealed a mammoth diamond engagement ring. “Rene has finally given in.” She took the man’s arm and squeezed her body to his. “We’re being married as fast as I can arrange it.” There was no mistaking Judith’s happiness.

After the couple strolled on, Brad explained quietly. “Judith stopped by last night to tell me Rene had finally proposed. Ever since we shared a sandbox as children, I’ve heard nothing but Rene, Rene, Rene from that woman.” He smiled. “I’ve never been in love with Judith. I love her, yes—like a sister. But that’s all.”

“Why did it take so long for them to finally get together?” Gail asked.

“They had been planning to wed, but had a silly misunderstanding and Judith married Linus DeWitt on the rebound,” Brad explained. “Even though the marriage lasted only a couple of years, Rene wouldn’t forgive. The problem standing between them was Rene’s pride—and Judith’s money. She set about contributing the money to worthy causes. One of them happened to be my campaign. Finally when Rene saw she was willing to risk her financial security, he gave in.”

Gail suddenly felt foolish. It had been a sisterly kiss she'd witnessed the night before.

When the last guests had boarded, Giles directed the captain to pull anchor. Gail slipped away from the men and sat in a deck chair to rest her feet and watch the Louisiana scenery slip by.

"Mind if I join you?" Judith sat down next to Gail. "Don't you think it's high time we buried the hatchet and became friends?"

"I wasn't aware we were enemies," Gail lied, trying to cover her discomfort.

"You didn't resent me, just a teeny bit?"

"Well," Gail frowned, "maybe a little."

"Gail—" Judith sat upright in her chair—"I have to be honest with you. I knew how you felt and I just let you keep feeling that way. You see, I was jealous of you, afraid you would take my good friend, my confidant away from me."

Gail smiled. "You were never in danger of losing Brad's friendship. Or anything of Brad. He and I are not your average young marrieds."

Judith laughed. "Oh, I know about your marriage." When Gail registered surprise, she quickly added, "Don't worry, Brad didn't tell me, not directly, that is. I just figured it out. The answers he didn't give me were answer enough. My hardheaded friend

just didn't realize he would fall in love with you."

Gail scoffed. "You don't know your friend as well as you think. He doesn't love me."

"Don't be too sure, Gail. I know what I'm talking about. In fact..." Just then Brad appeared.

"The two loveliest women on board."

"Ever the diplomat, Brad," Judith twitted. "I'd better find Rene before he gets too far away. I don't intend to lose him again." She rose from her chair and motioned Brad to take her place. "See you later." Judith winked at Gail.

Brad slid into the deck chair beside Gail. "Did you girls have a nice talk?"

"Oh, I just told her what I really thought of her, and that we didn't need her campaign money."

"You didn't!"

"No, I didn't," Gail laughed. "But that ought to teach you to be so nosy."

"I owe you one," Brad threatened, and they both laughed. He got up and offered Gail a hand. "We need to mingle, though I'd much rather sit here with you."

"Why, thank you." Her voice showed surprise.

Giles had arranged the cruise as a combination social and political gathering and had provided a variety of entertainment. There was a jazz combo from the French Quarter of New Orleans and a country and western band from Shreveport. Dancers from the Delta Ballet and actors from a

small theater group in Baton Rouge performed in the show room.

Every half hour or so, Brad would make a brief speech, moving from one area of the boat to another. The guests were responsive. Gail knew checks would follow in a day or so.

It was past two in the morning when the last guests departed the paddleboat.

"You were super tonight, Gail," Brad said as they journeyed home. "I think those people would just as soon vote for Mrs. Harrison as her husband what's-his-name."

THEY SPENT the next month traversing the state as they pursued their joint dream. Even though they were together constantly, they had little time for each other, for intimacy or privacy. Gail noticed a weariness about Brad she hadn't seen before. The hectic campaign schedule seemed to have taken its toll. But Brad could rest in November, and their marriage, if indeed there was to be a marriage, could be realized then. But not before.

Brad slumped down in the back seat of the limousine and closed his eyes as they drove from a Chamber of Commerce luncheon. He reached over and took her hand. "Listen, we'll be finished here around noon tomorrow. Would you mind terribly if I took an early flight back to Washington? Maybe I can get a little extra sleep before

that committee meeting on Monday."

Gail smiled sympathetically. "Of course I don't mind. I'll just hop a flight back to New Orleans."

He smiled at her through half-closed lids. "You know what I'd like to do when this election is over?"

"Run for President?"

"Very cute, Gail." He laughed. "I'd like to escape, fish, read, grow a beard—not think about anything, not even look at a newspaper."

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SHE LEFT the house early, bound for campaign headquarters. Evelyn was already there going over the results of a recent poll.

Evelyn looked up. "Gail!" she squealed. "Brad's only three points behind."

"Only three points?" Gail clasped her hands together.

Dave appeared in the doorway of his office. "Who's this stranger who's finally returned to do a little work?" He came up to Gail and gave her a peck on the cheek.

Gail wrapped an arm around his waist. "Brad didn't tell me you were going to be here."

"I think he wanted to keep me in Washington, but I insisted. I was beginning to get the idea he didn't trust me around you pretty ladies."

"Well, I'm glad you're here. There's plenty of work to go

around." She smiled at Dave, a glow on her cheeks.

Dave held her at arm's length. "Come on into my office and I'll brief you on the latest from Washington."

They spent an hour analyzing the figures and predicting what the next few weeks would bring. The intercom buzzed, then Dave handed the phone to Gail. "Your better half. Shall I lie and say we're in here making passionate love?"

"Not funny," Gail said, holding her hand over the mouthpiece.

"Gail, hello," Brad's voice was serious. "I didn't expect you back in the office so soon."

"I decided I'd better run down and check on the hired help." Dave shot a good-natured frown her way. "I'm only here for an hour or so before I buy out the department stores."

"Good girl," Brad said. "Listen, Gail, the reason I called is to tell you I may be up here longer than usual. Things really piled up while we were on the road. And I've got a lot of committee work, too."

"I know you can't help it," Gail said. "I guess I'll just have to carry on without you."

"Just make sure you don't carry on *too* well." His voice was calm, but Gail knew he was referring to her and Dave.

"Not to worry," she assured him. "I'll be alone and miserable, counting the minutes until you come back."

IT WAS Wednesday and Gail had planned to have lunch with Judith today. She was a few minutes early so she took advantage of the extra time to peer into little shops and private courtyards.

A ceramic rabbit in an antique shop caught her eye. It had raised pink rosebuds on its shiny white body and its tail was a larger rosebud. This one would be a perfect addition to the collection she had back in Washington. A few minutes later she was carrying the rabbit over to the cash register.

"A nice choice," the old store-keeper said. He laid his newspaper on the counter. "Excuse me a minute while I find a box."

As she waited, Gail looked down at a picture in the paper. Even upside down, she could recognize Brad. Who was that woman with him? Gail snatched the paper up and righted it. According to the brief article, Brad was putting in a hard day's night with the beautiful daughter of an ambassador from South America.

Tears filled her eyes and Gail wiped them away as the store-keeper returned with a small box. She kept her emotions in check as she paid for the purchase and left the shop. It was twelve o'clock. Judith would be waiting.

Gail arrived at the restaurant just as Judith was walking up from the other direction.

"Perfect timing," Judith exclaimed, giving Gail a hug. "I'm starved. How about you?"

"Maybe after a Bloody Mary," Gail answered as they were escorted to their seats. Maybe after ten Bloody Marys, she thought miserably.

"Well, how's the campaign going?" Judith was seated across from Gail at a corner table for two.

"So-so," Gail replied noncommittally.

"Well, I think Ramsey's beginning to run scared." Judith picked up a bread stick. "Did you see that silly picture in his newspaper? The jerk did a little plastic surgery on a photograph to try to embarrass Brad. You know, trying to make it look like a little tête-à-tête. Only I'm positive the picture was cut from a group scene. If you looked closely you could even see someone else's hand on her waist."

"But not everyone's as politically observant as you, Judith." Me, for instance, thought Gail.

AUNT SUSSY was on the telephone when Gail returned home. "Yes, Bradley, she's just come in," Aunt Sussy handed the telephone to Gail.

"You've been out?" Brad's voice was icy.

"Yes, I had lunch at Brennan's."

"Right. Is there anything new?" Brad sounded annoyed, almost angry.

"Nothing except the latest issue of Ramsey's paper. That hasn't upset you, has it?"

She could hear him sigh over the phone. "It's not what you think. It

was no reason for you to go running to Dave."

"Dave? I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the fact that the two of you have been out of reach all day. It doesn't take a genius to figure out you were together," Brad snarled.

"I don't like what you're getting at."

"Dammit, Gail, I'm up to my eyebrows in committee work and campaigning and don't relish domestic problems to boot." He paused. "Of course, women generally cause trouble at the most inopportune time, don't they?"

Before he could continue, Gail hung up the receiver. She hurried out of the den and headed for the stairs. She'd had enough of Brad and his distrust. That she'd earlier spent a few hours agonizing over her own distrust wasn't at issue. After all, she'd quickly understood her error as soon as Judith had pointed it out. But with Brad, there was no convincing him she and Dave were simply good friends.

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GAIL WAS curled up on the sofa in her bedroom when she heard the sound of tires on the gravel driveway. She looked out the window. Dave. What was he doing here? She strode out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

"Hello, Dave," she greeted him in the hallway. "Would you like to join me in the study?"

Dave nodded and followed her into the room.

"Gail, Brad asked me to come out. He needs you in Washington to do some work for him. Will you go?"

"Brad asked you to come here?"

Dave nodded.

"Did he say anything else? Anything about—"

"He said a lot, Gail—a lot of nonsense. Something about us being together incommunicado. But I set him straight—told him I'd been in meetings all day in Lake Charles. That he was a damned fool!" Dave leaned forward in his chair. "Will you go to Washington?"

She wasn't sure why Brad wanted her with him, but whatever his motive, maybe it was better accepting the request than staying here, miserable. Anyway, there were only a few weeks left until the election, and she needed to talk to Sam about going back to her job.

"SAM!" Gail ran into his arms. "It's so good to see you." Sam was leaning over a table, studying news clippings when Gail entered Brad's outer office. "What are you doing over here today?" she asked.

"Can't keep this old racehorse from the track." He patted her shoulder. "You've done a fine job of getting Brad close to a lead position."

"Don't give me so much credit," Gail said quickly. She walked over

to the coffeemaker and poured herself a cup. It was as thick and awful-looking as ever. "I'll never get to like this stuff." She grimaced as she took a swallow. And I guess I won't have to, she thought. Not now.

"Give yourself some time," Sam suggested.

"I'm afraid there won't be time for that. The campaign will be over soon and I'll be coming back to my old job, remember?" Gail squeezed his arm.

"Is that what you want to do?" Sam looked doubtful.

"Of course. After all, that's the way we planned it."

"Did we?" Sam picked up his pipe.

"Sure we did. When the election is over, then the marriage will be, too."

Sam's thick eyebrows formed a frown. "I didn't take you for a quitter, Gail. What does Brad think about all this?"

"He's more anxious to get rid of me than I am to leave."

"Well, let's just see about that." Sam pushed her into Brad's private office.

"Gail tells me the two of you plan to call it off after the election. Is that right?"

Brad looked up from the papers on his desk. If he were caught off guard, he didn't show it. "I'm seldom privy to the thoughts running through Gail's mind," he said evenly.

"Is this what you really want?" Sam's look was stern.

"I want whatever Gail wants," Brad replied.

"And if I ask her, she's going to say 'I want whatever Brad wants.' You are the two most exasperating individuals I've ever met." Sam puffed vigorously on his pipe. "My patience has run out. Now I'm going to tell you what you both want but are too darned stubborn to admit. Gail, I know you love Brad, so why don't you admit it to him?" He turned to Brad. "And you, Brad. Would a simple 'I love you' be so difficult?"

Brad didn't respond. His face was devoid of emotion, a poker face.

"Sam, you've got it all wrong," Gail protested. "Why don't you just give up? You manipulated us once. Twice. But not anymore. We're on to you now." She hurried out of the room into an outer office before Sam could stop her.

It was half an hour later when Sam finally emerged from Brad's office, red-faced and mad, mumbling something about "the darned younger generation." He muttered a grumpy goodbye to Gail as he rushed out the doors.

FOR THE NEXT week, Gail and Brad operated as a team, united in their purpose, but something was missing. The only conversation between them involved the campaign. During the gatherings they attended, they smiled and cooed at each other and no one was the

wiser that the newlyweds weren't a deliriously happy couple.

Gail sat at her desk drinking a cola and leafing through Brad's official photograph album. The pictures covered every aspect of his career—a visual chronicle of his days as a congressman.

Stuck in the back was a folder of new pictures not yet arranged. Gail pulled them out and began flipping through them. She was astonished. Most of the pictures were of her—one with Brad at Giles's party, one of her and Brad campaigning in Shreveport, another of the two of them strolling through the French Quarter in New Orleans and several of Gail alone. Brad walked up behind her.

"Enjoying your publicity photos?"

"I guess I am. What are all these, Brad?"

"Pictures I wanted to save. Do you have any objections?"

"No, but they won't have much purpose in a few weeks."

"Is that how you see it, Gail?"

"It's what we knew all along, isn't it?"

"Yes, I guess so," Brad said.

*

WELL, THIS IS the beginning of the end, she thought. A few more days and all the pretense will stop. The election will be decided, Brad will be making plans for the next few months and I—I'll be trying to figure out how to get my life back together. She sighed, suddenly very tired.

The campaign finale was a big blur. In a way, Gail was grateful for the pandemonium. It meant no arguments, no recriminations and no time alone with Brad. It also meant no time alone with herself to feel remorse or self-pity.

Finally, it happened. The polls had closed. A small group had gathered in the Harrisons' den to watch the returns on television. Downtown a second gathering was beginning to accumulate at the Fairmont. Brad was due there later, either to claim victory or to acknowledge defeat.

Gail sat in a corner chair nervously watching the returns. It was slow going. Ramsey ahead by a thousand votes, then Brad in the lead, then Ramsey. At eight-thirty, Brad took the top position and held it. By ten o'clock it was all over. The room erupted into a chaos of backslapping, handshaking, hugging and a round of drinks.

Gail silently stole away from the room and quietly crept up the staircase. She knew if she didn't go immediately, she'd stay until Brad kicked her out.

She pulled a small bag from the top of the closet and twisted Brad's wedding rings from her finger, then laid them on the dressing table where he could find them. She wanted no memories of him other than those that would cling forever to her heart.

The bedroom door opened quietly. "Gail, are you about—what's

going on?" Brad was frowning, a puzzled look on his face.

"This marriage had an election-day detonation clause, remember? Congratulations on your victory, Senator." Her voice was stilted.

"It's *our* victory, Gail," he corrected, "and it would be hollow without you." He took her hand in his. "I don't want you to go."

"Brad, I don't want to go on with this loveless marriage...."

"I see." He dropped her hand. "You mean you're going to leave. Just like that."

"Just like that," she echoed.

Brad stared at her. "Then you don't have any feelings for me at all?"

He didn't look like a man who'd finally achieved his dream. In fact, he looked hurt and defeated. "Oh, Brad, I *do* love you. I love you so much I'm not about to keep you trapped in a marriage you don't want, to a woman you don't love." She turned to the bureau and continued pulling clothes out.

He was by her side in three broad strides, turning her to face him. "But I love you, too, Gail. I've loved you for a long time. I was afraid to tell you," he said. "Afraid you didn't feel the same way. But Sam knew...."

Brad picked up the rings lying forsaken on the dressing table and handed them to her. "Please put these back on."

"You mean—you love me?"

"I began falling in love on our honeymoon. But I was angry. Mad about the campaign, mad about

having to compromise my life, and yours, just to save face. But you were such a damn good sport. It was harder and harder to stay angry. Aunt Sussy and Sam loved you. It all just began sinking in. I wanted it to be a real marriage."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Maybe I've never gotten over my mother walking out on my father, and on me. Trust just isn't a natural feeling for me. I was afraid to let you be around Dave. I was even jealous of Giles sometimes. Mostly I was afraid I'd lose you. I didn't know what to do." He ran

his fingers through his hair. "So I hid my feelings. Gail, don't leave. I love you." His lips pressed against hers urgently, demandingly. Gail returned the kiss, as she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. The answer he sought was there.

"I'll never leave," she said.

Brad picked her up and carried her toward the bed.

"Brad, they're waiting at campaign headquarters," she murmured.

"Let them wait."



STAR SIGNS—JANUARY & FEBRUARY



CAPRICORN December 23-January 22

Travel and work are linked and there is a chance to show what you are capable of. A bonus helps to improve your bank balance, which may start you planning a few improvements to your home.



AQUARIUS January 23-February 22

You have bags of energy and enthusiasm for new plans, and while others may not understand your need for change, they will be supportive.



PISCES February 23-March 22

Money matters need to be handled carefully so your spending won't get out of control; make lists and leave those credit cards at home.



ARIES March 23-April 22

Romance is in the air, so be prepared, as it will crop up in the most unexpected places. Finances look good and you could be planning a special celebration.



TAURUS April 23-May 22

Try to curb your jealous feelings; they are not founded on truth and will hurt those close instead. Treat your friends to an evening out and you'll end up feeling good about yourself.



GEMINI May 23-June 21

A little pampering works wonders for your flagging spirits; try a new hairdo or a quick diet to improve your self-esteem. A card brings news of a long-lost acquaintance.



CANCER June 22-July 22

A friend needs your help; this may upset a few of your plans but you'll be well rewarded. There could also be problems with mechanical items.



LEO July 23-August 22

Changes are in the air and you will need to talk through your troubles with those closest to you. Toward the end of the month, your spirits lift and you will see the way through to better times.

STAR SIGNS (continued)



VIRGO August 23-September 22

A social, easygoing month with many old friends and some new ones seeking you out. Relax and enjoy this happy month, as you could do with a break from routine.



LIBRA September 23-October 22

All kinds of opportunities abound and you could be spoiled for choice. Relationships improve and you will find support among those close to you.



SCORPIO October 23-November 22

A creative and constructive period in which you start to move toward your goal. Romance is also highlighted, and you could be spending more time with that someone special.



SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

You're looking good and feeling on top, so go out and enjoy life; you will be attracting the right sort of attention and there is a chance for an amorous affair.

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READER'S CORNER

CROSSWORD #28

ACROSS

- Establishes
- Bony herring
- Stocky horse
- Actor's quest
- "A ___ of Two Cities"
- Color
- ____-friendly
- Capitalist Smith
- Nibbled
- "The ___ of the Native"
- Kind
- Time's impatient partner
- Classroom jottings
- Edge
- July appliances
- the cat
- Lyricist Gershwin
- Cease-fire
- "Blame It on ___"
- Morse units
- Attract
- Posed
- Come in
- Summers, in St. Tropez
- Back
- Swapped
- Pronoun for a girl
- Sugar source
- Ore vein
- Towel word
- Always

58. Tied

- ___ sirree!
- Bastes
- Shipped

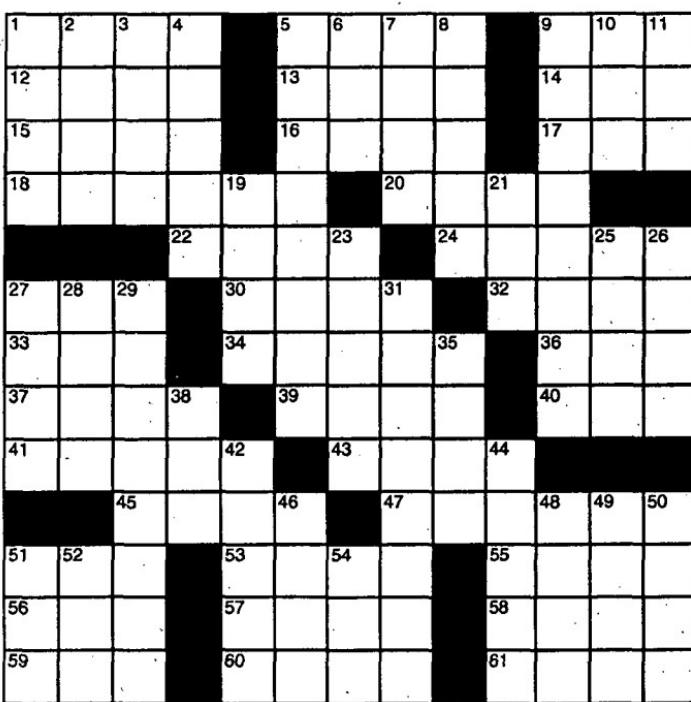
- Runs off at the mouth
- Ump's call
- Drone or worker

- Water jug
 - Get the point
 - Tears
 - Bargain opportunities
 - Enthusiastic review
 - Noah's scout
 - "East of ___"
 - Impression
 - Timid
 - Hasten
 - Novel
- Solution on page 43 of this issue.**

DOWN

- Goad
- Facility
- Weight allowance
- Support piece
- Flag
- Possessed
- Alack's mate
- Satan

- Cleft
- Roy or Reiner
- Harden
- Charles Lamb
- Reno opening
- Astronaut Sally
- Press clothes
- Cot's lack
- Spreads



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Dear Reader: Thank you for subscribing to *Harlequin World's Best Romances* magazine! We are currently looking for input and opinions from our readers in order to continue providing you with the best magazine we can. Please fill out the following survey and return it to the address listed at the end of the survey. To the first 500 responders, we will be sending a surprise gift as a token of our gratitude. **Thanks for your help!**

1. How would you rate *Harlequin World's Best Romances* magazine overall?

- 1.1 Excellent
- .2 Very good
- .3 Good
- .4 Fair
- .5 Poor

2. How many issues of *Harlequin World's Best Romances* magazine have you read to date?

- 2.1 0 to 2 issues
- .2 3 to 6 issues
- .3 7 to 12 issues (1 to 2 years)
- .4 13 or more issues (2+ years)

3. Please rank the following magazine features from favorite to least favorite by assigning numbers from 1 to 5 beside each feature (1=favorite, 5=least favorite).

- (3) _____ Author biographies
- (4) _____ Letter from the editor
- (5) _____ Horoscopes
- (6) _____ Preview section for future issues
- (7) _____ Crossword puzzle

4. With regard to the individual stories:

- (a) Would you prefer them to be longer, shorter or the same length as they presently are?**

- 8.1 Longer than they currently are
- .2 Shorter than they currently are
- .3 Same length as they currently are
- .4 A variety of lengths within an issue.

- (b) Are you satisfied with the current number of stories published in each issue?**

- 9.1 Prefer more stories
- .2 Prefer same number of stories as in current issues
- .3 Prefer fewer stories

5. How often would you like to receive *Harlequin World's Best Romances* magazine?

- 10.1 One issue every 2 weeks (24 issues per year)
- .2 One issue per month (12 issues per year)
- .3 One issue every other month (6 issues per year—current offer)

6. In each issue, we give you special promotional offers for other Harlequin romance books. Would you be interested in *more* special promotional offers for romance books in future issues?

11.1 Yes

.2 No

7. Please indicate your interest level in each of the following as possible features in future issues:

	Very Interested	Somewhat Interested	Somewhat Uninterested	Very Uninterested
Contests/Sweepstakes	12.1 <input type="checkbox"/>	.2 <input type="checkbox"/>	.3 <input type="checkbox"/>	.4 <input type="checkbox"/>
More author information	13.1 <input type="checkbox"/>	.2 <input type="checkbox"/>	.3 <input type="checkbox"/>	.4 <input type="checkbox"/>
Reader letters	14.1 <input type="checkbox"/>	.2 <input type="checkbox"/>	.3 <input type="checkbox"/>	.4 <input type="checkbox"/>
Recipes	15.1 <input type="checkbox"/>	.2 <input type="checkbox"/>	.3 <input type="checkbox"/>	.4 <input type="checkbox"/>
Advice column/ household tips	16.1 <input type="checkbox"/>	.2 <input type="checkbox"/>	.3 <input type="checkbox"/>	.4 <input type="checkbox"/>
Newsletter	17.1 <input type="checkbox"/>	.2 <input type="checkbox"/>	.3 <input type="checkbox"/>	.4 <input type="checkbox"/>
Additional magazines with similar format but different editorial (e.g. historical romance, mystery)	18.1 <input type="checkbox"/>	.2 <input type="checkbox"/>	.3 <input type="checkbox"/>	.4 <input type="checkbox"/>
More puzzles and games	19.1 <input type="checkbox"/>	.2 <input type="checkbox"/>	.3 <input type="checkbox"/>	.4 <input type="checkbox"/>
Other	20.1 <input type="checkbox"/>	.2 <input type="checkbox"/>	.3 <input type="checkbox"/>	.4 <input type="checkbox"/>

Comments:

(21,26)

8. What favorite magazines do you currently subscribe to or purchase?

(27,32)

9. Please indicate your age range:

33.1 Under 18 years .3 25 to 34 years .5 50 to 64 years
.2 18 to 24 years .4 35 to 49 years .6 65 years or older

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SWP-ME96

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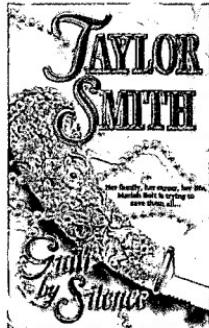
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